

Harry Potter and the Irish Choice

Summary: With all the crappy stuff Harry goes through at Hogwarts, the smart money would be on him transferring to a different, better school early in his career. Here's one way it might have happened. In homage to the many good stories on this topic, here's my short series.

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Harry Potter's First Year

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Harry Potter woke up from his first night sleeping at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, got dressed, and finally arrived at the Great Hall, after getting lost three times. He sat down and began to eat when an entire flock of post owls seemed to dive bomb him. Fully a quarter of all the owls that showed up that morning delivered mail to Harry Potter.

The young man didn't have the slightest idea what to do until Ron and Neville began helping him to offload the parcels and letters the birds carried.

He sipped at some disgustingly sweet pumpkin juice while he began digging through the letters. Most were gushing. One called him a disgusting half-blood monster. He ripped it up immediately. The packages contained a wide variety of sweets, knitted clothing (even a scarf in Gryffindor colors), books, and other possessions. Harry didn't have the first clue who any of the senders were or even really why they had made him such lavish gifts. Aside from his scar and his status as the Boy-Who-Lived.

Professor McGonagall descended from the Head Table and began handing out timetables. She stopped and tried to survey all the things Harry had received. It looked like she was considering scooping up all his mail and withholding it from him. Or at least that was the impression Harry got. Why would she want to do that?

“Professor, do you know why all these people are telling me about the other letters they’ve written me? These are the first I’ve ever received.”

Her eye twitched a bit before she frowned and shook her head. “I’ve no idea, Mr. Potter. Here is your class list for the year.”

She walked off and continued to hand out schedules. Harry pondered his situation before deciding to return the letters and packages to his dorm. McGonagall had obviously lied to him. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had done that often enough. Harry had plenty of experience watching them and their sweet Dudders lie to be an expert in lie detection. But why did she lie to him?

The next morning, Harry received no owls. Nor any the morning after that. As he walked out of the Great Hall confused at the difference between a flood of mail and packages and two days of nothing, he asked in his best ironic voice, “What does a guy have to do to get his mail around here?”

Suddenly a bizarre looking creature with massive ears and eyes – and green skin! – appeared in front of him.

“Oh, Master Harry, Mipsy was being hopeful you’d ask for her assistance.”

After Harry ‘eep’ed in shock and went through the drill confirming exactly what the green-skinned creature was, Harry followed Mipsy into the dungeons where she waved her arms and a doorway appeared.

“I was told I couldn’t find you and be telling you about this room, Master Harry, but now that you’ve asked, I can.” She had a positively gleeful expression on her face. “Mipsy has been tending your mail for ten years now...”

“Ten!”

“Yes, Master Potter. Dumbly put up ‘owl wards’ on the bad house you stayed in. Only Hogwarts owls were being allowed in.”

Harry walked into the room and saw several mountains of letters, ten mountains actually, one for each year Harry hadn't received any owl post.

"Criminy," Harry muttered.

"Let's be reading your letters, Master Harry?"

"Er, alright. Let's start with the most recent, I guess."

And they began sifting through them. After spending his Saturday morning tending to his correspondence (he only got through a bit more than two mountains), Harry was livid.

"Mipsy, do you know why I'm not getting mail after that first day again?"

"Dumbly put up 'owl wards' for you again, here at Hogwarts..."

Harry's jaw dropped before he got angry. Vernon-style angry, color changing and swearing included. "Interfering old bastard. Does he think he's my father? The man's a glorified school teacher..."

It took most of the weekend, but Harry and Mipsy opened everything and sorted it into piles. Crackpots – the largest pile – contained abusive letters or insane ramblings on various topics. Mipsy vanished them. Threat letters would be sent to the Ministry to investigate, at Mipsy's suggestion. "There being people who handle this sort of thing, Master Harry."

Polite letters – a sizeable mountain, but by far the smallest of the three main stacks – would each receive an acknowledgement and explanation that Harry had only now received his backlogged mail. He noted quite a few familiar names – Longbottom, Wood, Weasley, Patil, Bones, Abbott, and the like – and a number of unfamiliar ones such as Lupin, Diggle, Moody, Spinster, Cresswell, and Tonks. A fourth pile was the most interesting – invitations to schools other than Hogwarts. It held eleven potentially intriguing letters. Mipsy had

clearly identified what they were for her 'young master.' Harry would look at them later.

He did have some homework to get finished before classes resumed tomorrow. And, worst of all, his first lesson with that scary-looking teacher, Scape or Screech or Snipe. Snape. Yes, his name was Snape.

Harry was still in shock when he walked out of his first Potions class. That horrifying teacher had indeed scapegoated everything blameworthy onto Harry – and screeched like a proverbial banshee for a good chunk of his lecture – and sniped about everything else. And, worst of all, he hadn't taught a single thing.

He had, however, mocked a student, poor Longbottom, when he injured himself. (Snape, of course, hadn't been paying attention and assisting his students.) Harry had only taken basic sciences at his primary school, but even he knew that the Chemistry teachers at Stonewall would get into trouble if their students got injured in class. They'd probably be fired even for acting like Snape had. Why was the magical world so different? Harry almost longed for Stonewall and the Dursleys in that moment.

That evening, Harry left dinner and went to his mail room. He'd promptly tucked away and forgotten the idea of ever going back to the Dursleys; he couldn't stand them. No, he thought of a different solution now. He was more interested in those other schools than he'd ever thought possible. He began to sort through the letters. Harry had thought Hogwarts was going to be an escape from the Dursleys, not just officially sanctioned 'more-of-the-same'. That Snape git was as bad, in his own virulent way, as Uncle Vernon. No thanks! And school teachers who hid his mail for ten years? Sounded like some of those crazies on the news he caught now and again when Vernon bellowed his anger.

Harry opened the first, very stiff letter and saw that it was from a school called Durmstrang located on the German/Czech border. The letter was quite detailed and it outlined a couple of issues Harry would have to consider. Frankly it sounded worse than Hogwarts, had a drafty castle in the middle of a frigid part of the world, taught in

languages Harry didn't speak, was rather condescending about accepting him given Harry's 'mixed-blood heritage,' and sounded depressing. Harry pitched that letter aside

The next was from Beauxbatons Academy of Magic, but Harry wasn't even able to finish its four pages of explanations. The whole thing was written in a horribly feminine hand on powder blue paper, which made Harry think only of the invitations his Aunt Petunia sent out on a weekly basis to all the women she gossiped about behind their backs. No. He couldn't even read their invitation; how could he imagine spending time at a place that wrote such a beastly document?

The third, from the Salem Witches Institute, was an improvement. Four typewritten pages clearly explaining magic and what the Institute taught its students. Harry imagined for a brief moment how much fun he might have in America, but when he gave the document a second reading – especially the section explaining that he would be the first male student ever admitted – he realized that the whole invitation was based on his fame. As potentially nice as it would be to be surrounded by an all-female student body, Harry didn't want to be that different. Being at a place that sucked up to him because of his name and his scar would be maddening. Harry already hated being famous and he'd only known of his fame for a month or so.

Harry fell in love with the Franklin Academy of Magical Sciences based on its ten page mini-treatise. Its programs sounded incredible, its facilities sounded well maintained and adequate, its teachers intelligent and reasonable (unlike some Potions teachers Harry could name), but his face fell into despair when he read the final page. The school had one major problem. The Franklin Academy met for eight months a year, even less than Hogwarts. And that meant Harry would have to spend four months back with the Dursleys, rather than just two and a half. He sadly put that thick sheaf of paperwork in the "to-receive-polite-rejection-letter" pile.

He next picked up the two half-hearted pages from the Jefferson School for Young Witches and Wizards. They tried to attract his attention, but they admitted in the first paragraph that they were geared for wizards and witches in the seven to twelve age range, to prepare them for attending the Franklin Academy or the Salem

Witches Institute. (The letter also noted that they'd first attempted to contact Harry at age seven, but had never received a reply. Yet they were still attempting another letter as he hit age eleven. That revelation made Harry especially angry as Harry could have been away from the Dursleys years ago had the stupid 'owl wards' not been in place.) Should Harry choose that as an option, he'd still have to find a new school for the following year.

The seven pages of the next letter from The Pharoah School of Sun Magic were perhaps the most tempting of them all so far. A far away country, sun drenched and awash in history, with programs that focused mainly on history, warding, and the wanded subjects.

Harry had loved studying about ancient Egypt in school. He'd read every book on Egypt in the school library one year. This magical school held its classes inside a pyramid; what could be better than that? He kept the letter on his lap as he picked up the next envelope.

This one was brief and to the point:

Scoil ar Draiocht Glas (School for Green Magic)

Orion Murphy-Black, Headmaster

Dear Mr. Potter,

I write to you to offer you a place at the Scoil ar Draiocht Glas, a school for magic located in Glenweir Cove's Forest, Ireland. Given your likely non-magical upbringing, I would like to take a few moments to explain this world to you. You were born to a powerful witch (Lily Evans Potter) and wizard (James Potter); we believe that you will also be a powerful wizard. Our records show that your mother, who held dual British-Irish citizenship, elected to attend Hogwarts over the Scoil, but we would like to extend you the same offer we did to your mother many years ago.

As a potentially powerful magical user, you will need to quickly and adequately learn the entire realm of magical history, theory, and practice. However, having grown up in the non-magical world, we suspect you would miss the traditional subjects you are already

familiar with. At the Scoil, we insist all preparatory students learn magical and non-magical subjects to give them the widest possible set of career and educational options once they graduate. Students traditionally begin at the Scoil at age eleven and leave at the age of seventeen or eighteen after completing a Mastery in a magical subject. Many of our students then elect to attend non-magical colleges and universities to further extend their educations.

I should clearly state that the Scoil was initially founded three hundred seven years ago to allow Irish Master's candidates a place to prepare to pass their examinations. Only in the last fifty years have we accepted any preparatory students at all: the current number of preparatory students is thirty-seven while we have three hundred eleven candidates for Masteries in various subjects.

The school meets year round and is for the highly self-motivated, given our particular educational model. All students are encouraged to pursue special research topics once they have completed their first three years of study. Be warned: the school operates at a very fast pace, allows no one to operate "under the radar," to borrow a non-magical phrase, and will require considerable internal discipline from its successful students. Having known your mother, I suspect you share her considerable scholarly talents and her drive for success.

Should you wish to learn further about the Scoil, I await your owl. We here would love to have you enroll at our school, but only if you feel you can fully take advantage of the environment we have to offer.

Regards,

Orion Murphy-Black

Harry set the letter down. He was blown away. It wasn't fawning or otherwise ridiculous. It had been sent to him not solely because of his fame like all the other letters, but because the same opportunity had once been offered to his mother. Best of all, it met all year long. No more Dursleys!

He thought over the second to last paragraph, the one about his academic skills. Harry had been an indifferent student while with the

Dursleys, but that was more because he was punished, rather than rewarded, for academic success. And here, at Hogwarts, where he was admired because of his fame, he knew he wouldn't be challenged on the basis of what he could do – rather, he'd be gladhanded through based on what he had once done. It felt nice to be in a place where at least one person would hold him to a high standard based on what was possible given his family background. And no more Dursleys or Professor Snape. He couldn't dismiss the importance of that last point enough.

Harry quickly read through the other letters, but none compared to the Irish school. He even put aside the letter from the Egyptian school.

Harry quickly wrote a letter with a long series of questions for Headmaster Murphy-Black. He had the sudden inspiration to thoroughly explain why he was so late in writing. His second draft included a paragraph that explained apologetically about the piles of unacknowledged mail hidden in a room in Hogwarts and begged for forgiveness for missing any application deadlines. He took an hour to draft brief letters explaining his tardiness in responding to the other schools as well. It would be a long time before Harry heard about what kind of chaos those simple acknowledgements would cause.

The Scoil's response came on Wednesday morning. Harry saved the letter until after classes and then read it when he was alone. It answered all his considerable questions and set his mind at ease. The one section that amused him the most read as follows:

"I was quite concerned that your mail has been withheld from you for ten years. According to the International Confederation of Warlocks, mail may not be unknowingly or unconsentually withheld from any witch or wizard, including convicted felons, for any reason. This is quite a severe breach of international law should you elect to pursue it, Mr. Potter, as freedom of communication is held by inviolate by all law-abiding witches and wizards."

Harry was amused, but didn't think it would do him any good when he was now settled on leaving Hogwarts. Dumbledore didn't seem the sort to really care about laws, did he? (Even if he had written a lot of them himself.) Hagrid had accidentally spilled the beans to Harry one

afternoon in his hut on a lot of what Dumbledore had done over the years, particularly as it related to Harry Potter. How Hagrid could remain faithful to Dumbledore boggled Harry's imagination. He shook his head and put it all out of mind.

Harry sent the Scoil a return letter on Thursday requesting a portkey for Sunday morning. Harry only told Mipsy that he was leaving and asked her to forward on any new mail he might receive. (With Mipsy's assistance, every other reasonable letter from the past ten years had received a polite and generic response. The Hogwarts school owls received quite a work-out in those few days.) The house elf seemed quite sad for "Master Harry" to be leaving, but she was generally glad to be of service.

It was daybreak on Sunday morning when a giddy-looking, messy haired boy drug a trunk and an owl cage down the path from Hogwarts Castle to the main gate. Once he reached his destination, he pulled out an oddly shaped medallion, spoke the phrase "Green Magic," and disappeared from Hogwarts and Britain altogether. His trunk, his owl, his everything was gone.

He left only a brief note on his dorm room bed explaining that he was withdrawing from Hogwarts in view of pursuing other educational opportunities. He made no mention of his dislike of Snape, or that he'd fallen asleep in Binns' class, or that he'd found his mail had been withheld from him for a decade, or that he knew that Professor McGonagall had lied to him about the mail situation. Or that he'd heard about strange folks like Dumbledore doing harm to children. Harry had learned from the Dursleys about how to keep secrets.

Harry landed in a clearing inside what appeared to be a very old forest. Following an old, rarely tread path, Harry progressed down, down, down into the mouth of a cavern. As he stepped through into the smallish cavern, Harry felt deep, heavy magic settle over his skin. When he left the first cavern and entered a larger, second one, he felt even more powerful magic wash over him, welcoming him, protecting him. He knew Hogwarts had wards, too, but they hadn't felt like these. Harry didn't even know precisely where the Hogwarts ones began and ended.

Harry continued walking. There were seven more of these magical barriers before Harry came into the final chamber, a massive, well lit cavern with a white and gray stone building right in the center of it all. The building was smaller than Hogwarts, only five stories at most with no towers and interior courtyards, but it seemed like it had more usable space. It was impressive in different ways from Hogwarts. It wasn't imposing; it was beautiful.

The entire floor of the cavern was covered in lush green grass and trees even though there was no natural light available. Harry began to understand a bit about the school name, then. The School of Green Magic – even grass could grow in this artificially lit, but profoundly magical environment. He could even spy some 'greenhouses' inside this cavern. Amazing.

Harry was stopped outside in the cavern for quite a few minutes before he heard and felt someone walk toward him. "Not as impressive an entrance as your boats at Hogwarts, but it serves," the tall man said.

Harry observed the young looking man. He was clearly younger than Uncle Vernon or any of his former neighbors on Privet Drive.

"It was nice enough. It was a pretty walk from the forest in. And the caverns are beautiful. The magic you used in them somehow made me feel safe..."

"That's as it should be, young Harry. Old, residual leprechaun magics combined with modern wards. It's quite a design, I think you'll find." He stuck out his hand. "My name is Orion Murphy-Black. I am the headmaster here, at least for a couple more years..."

Harry stuck out his hand. "It's nice to meet you. You wrote a really good letter, sir."

The headmaster laughed and then shook Harry's hand. "Come inside. We'll have a chat and get you set up."

The tour of the school leading to the Head's office had been brief and helpful. Harry had left his trunk in the main hall of the school. "It'll be

perfectly safe there. The house elves will even move for it after they notice it.”

The Head’s office didn’t seem intimidating at all when Harry arrived there with his ‘guide.’

“Come in, young master wizard, and find yourself a seat. We can go over the formal introductions to the school, now that you’ve had a bit of a view of it, and then I can answer any questions you might have decided to ask...”

Harry smiled. No one had bothered with such things when he showed up at Hogwarts. It was rush, rush, rush; the disorganized exiting of the train; the boats; sorting hat; a bit of nosh; then sleeping in Gryffindor. What a confusing mess.

“Let’s talk academics first, young Harry. We’ve borrowed a bit from the Muggle world as we use a modified Oxbridge approach to instruction: you’ll have tutors and one weekly individual lesson for each of your subjects, but you’ll have far more than two classes per term as the non-magicals do.”

The headmaster laughed at himself here. “There will be lectures on a variety of topics offered schoolwide and you should attend those of interest or those indicated by your tutors. Your sciences and math courses in particular will make use of mandatory lectures. Usually guest lecturers or some of our graduate students speaking on topics of interest; some can be quite good, others rather tedious, but I never officially said that, did I?

"We have fifteen week terms and three terms per school year. You’ll find yourself having to learn the material for your class before you show up for your tutorial, so our Scoil is actually based on a form of monitored self-instruction where your teachers are there to help ensure you learn good practices. When you need them, we offer a proctored magic practice hall most hours of the day and night during term; eventually you’ll also need access to our proctored potions and science labs, greenhouses, and astronomical observatories (those require you to journey hundreds of feet above the school through special staircases).

"You meet with the current headmaster – me, for now – once at the end of a term to discuss your progress and your choices for the next term." He sounded like he was reeling off a familiar spiel.

"There's two weeks of break between terms generally, although it's usually three at the winter holiday. You have total freedom to leave the school during breaks, if you so choose. We don't require you to return home to any guardians; feel free to go touring or visit with a friend. You're legally a child, but we prefer to treat you like an adult."

Harry liked that last admission very much.

"So, more questions, young Harry?"

He shook his head. Everything made sense so far.

"I'll show you to your room after we finish discussing your first term courses. Maybe I can even see fit to show you to the dining hall for some breakfast. I take it you haven't eaten yet..."

"That's correct, sir."

Orion Murphy-Black pulled a few documents off his desk. One was a small pamphlet. The other a single sheet of parchment.

"The printed pamphlet explains the first three years of schooling in general terms. Your first term timetable is what I want to chat about. It'll seem like a lot of classes, but you'll only have about two per day and one on Saturday morning. Plus any lectures you choose to attend. That leaves you a considerable amount of time to prepare for lessons – or explore outside – or learn to ride a broom – or gorge in the dining hall – or what have you. So long as you get all of your assigned work done, you pick the order.

"Do remember you'll have about three hours of work per course per week, more for the languages and maths. I do also recommend that you participate in the beginner's physical education course offered every morning at six forty-five. Builds up stamina and energy levels, very helpful for young witches and wizards..."

Harry just nodded. He remembered primary school and daily gymnasium.

“Mondays will be your tutorial in the Study of Other Magical Races. I believe we have Master’s candidates working on leprechauns, vampires, dragons, griffins, and sphinxes this year, so those will likely be the major topics. You’ll take this for three years before it becomes an elective. In that time, you should get to experience nearly every kind of creature or magical race known to us. You will also have Dueling and Beginning Combat, which is unlike most other courses in that you share your tutor and time slot with everyone else in your year group. The course at your present level will be mostly simple spells, plus learning physical techniques that you can also practice in your physical education option. We don’t start teaching swordplay until the middle of your second year and magical dueling until your third term of this year, so that’ll start during the summer.

“Tuesdays you will have Introduction to Magical Culture. You’ll take it for just the first year here at the Scoil. This course will have a lot of mandatory lectures in addition to the tutorials. Expect the course to cover magical history, traditions, occult studies, magical theory, basic runes, and magical math. I assure you that we hire no ghosts, so the history components should at least be bearable.” Harry laughed. “You’ll also have basic Charms, Jinxes, and Hexes. Most students consider this the single best first year course. You’ll have to tell me if you agree.

“On Wednesdays, expect beginner-level Transfiguration and Animation and English Language and Literature. On Thursdays, you’ll have Elementary Mathematics – which has long, long drill sets due every week – and Introduction to the Sciences. The laboratory component to that course begins second term. On Fridays, you’ll have Politics, Philosophy, and Economics plus European and World History. On Saturday morning, you’ll take a language. First term options include French or Latin or German. Some students choose to take more than one, but that’s up to you. You’ll also have a few mandatory hours of language laboratory and the teacher will probably pair you up with a native speaker of French or German to practice with on a regular basis.”

Harry sat trying to digest it all. That really was a lot of classwork.

“Sir, when am I supposed to take Potions or Herbology? They were part of my Hogwarts classes.”

The headmaster nodded. “Yes, we add those in a bit later. They take less time to get you proficient in than some of the other magical subjects – assuming they’re properly taught. Herbology will start for you in summer term and Potions the term after. The most you’ll ever have is three classes per day, I’d expect. There are a lot of other classes that come in and out of the schedule, you see.

"Your introductory science course eventually becomes Astronomy, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Archaeology, Anthropology, Introduction to Technology and Engineering, or several other options. Quite a few history options as you get older, too, both magical and otherwise. Your math courses change into trigonometry or algebra or calculus. Your Introduction to Magical Culture can become Ancient Runes or Modern Warding Techniques and Cursebreaking or Magical Mathematics and Arithmancy. You can finish up with one language and start some others. We offer a course in Magical Languages, plus usually Gaelic, Italian, Greek, Spanish, Ancient Egyptian and Sumerian, Arabic, Mandarin, and Hindi. Sometimes others too, depending on who we have here pursuing their Masteries. Our Mastery students defray the costs of their education by taking on students, so I hope you’ll find them interested and interesting instructors. If not, please speak with me.”

Harry nodded that he understood. Some parts of the explanation sounded like how Stonewall had managed its students to some extent – and Harry had been prepared to go to that Muggle school until very recently.

“Students take the International Standard O-levels in their third year – International Standard include both magical and nonmagical examinations, if you didn’t know – and their International Standard N-levels in their fifth year usually; nearly all successful students begin their mastery-level work from there. I should mention that the nonmagical subjects on the test are given equivalent score and your

results are filed with the 'Muggle' authorities which should make it easier if you ever wish to attend a nonmagical university or take a nonmagical job."

Harry had already heard that part from the written answers the Headmaster had already supplied.

"What do the students do for fun?" Harry sounded a touch worried that everyone here was actually worse than Hermione Granger.

The headmaster smiled at the innocent, slightly fearful question. "We're intense, but I think you'll find the people here are fun. Even the house elves like to prank students, so stay on their good side unless you like your underwear to be dyed green for a month. No, seriously, they've done that to me before." Both of the men in the office chuckled for a moment. "Remember that we're a closed campus during term, save for emergencies – so people amuse themselves with their friends and with clubs. In the interterms, people organize trips and contests and even African safari quests – the only limit is your imagination and bank account, I'd say."

"And what sort of clubs are there, sir?"

"Every subject area has one or more clubs, like for Charms or History. These are mostly run by the master's candidates, which is a good thing as they like to organize field trips during the between-term holidays. Then there are the profession clubs, like the Teachers Association and the Junior ICW for budding politicians. Language clubs, too, for French, German, and Egyptian...maybe more. The biggest club is probably the Flying Team: we don't have organized Quidditch teams here or offer flying lessons, but the club takes care of that. It's almost all preparatory students; really good people leading it this year, too. They usually plan a couple of trips to professional Quidditch matches every year. Learn to fly and then you can play in a pickup game or two on the weekend. I think you might like it. Your father was a great Chaser in his day... Then the Dueling Club is quite useful: you learn a lot of spells and techniques and get to relieve some stress by firing spells at your classmates!"

Harry laughed.

“The Creatures Club does perhaps the best trips every year. They like to hit a lot of the world’s magical preserves, Tanzania last year, Tasmania this year, I think, or was it Romania? Plus the stuff they do during term – a lot of crazy folks speak on their passions: dragon breeding, nundu handling, snake charming, and the like.”

The questions came and went for twenty minutes before an intrigued Harry Potter cleared out his head. Partially it was stomach telling him it was now time to eat.

“Alright then, a quick test, and then some food, alright?”

Orion brought out a blood ritual set and collected a bit of Harry’s blood. He performed the three incantations and waited for the results of the diagnostic ritual.

“We use this to determine if you’ll need any special assistance or lessons, say if you have any unusual skills... And it seems you do, Mr. Potter. You should be a natural in the Magical Languages course in a few years as you seem to be a Parselmouth, snake language, you know, and you’ve got a block on you to keep you from accessing your metamorphmagus abilities...”

“Huh?”

“Shape shifting. Some wizards can change their hair color, eye color, body shape, pretty much anything. One I knew could even change his natural scent and magical aura; he wound up being a very effective bank robber, could impersonate anyone anytime. On the other hand, some don’t get much of anything. It really depends and we’ll just have to see once we take that block off you. And, we’ll check for any other types of blocks on your skills and abilities, of course, as it appears that Hogwarts hasn’t.”

Harry was peeved again at his old school. He also felt more than a few fingers of fear run down his spine.

“Sir, are you sure that they can’t make me leave here? I mean, the Headmaster there apparently stuck me with my relatives until it was time for me to come to his school...”

“Well, during term, he won’t be able to get in at all. In fact, it’d be rather amusing to see him try. Those old leprechaun magics are quite vicious to people who aren’t holding a school portkey. Dumbledore would be wandering up and down the Irish countryside for days or even weeks... Off term, if you left the school grounds, he could try, I suppose. But you’re a joint citizen of Britain and Ireland. Would you like to claim Irish sanctuary, make a formal case over what was done to you?”

Harry blinked rapidly for a few moments. Then he nodded his head. “I never want to see those people again, my aunt, my uncle, my cousin. Never.”

“Let’s get that started before we find some food.” He rifled around behind him trying to find some form or other. “Oh, I had a question for you, Mr. Potter. You already started Hogwarts. Why did you transfer out this soon after the term started? What was the straw that broke the camel’s back?”

“Snape. Their Potions instructor. He treated me like my relatives did. I came to magic school to learn magic, but also to be rid of them. I wasn’t staying at a place that employed the equivalent of my Uncle Vernon.”

The Headmaster nodded along. “Sensible. I know a bit about that man, too, and I wouldn’t want him around children either, particularly prepubescent young men, if you catch my meaning. Okay, here’s the form. Now that we’re doing things by the book I have to ask if you’d like to accept dual citizenship? Irish and British?”

The questions lasted ten minutes before Orion Murphy-Black had the formal complaint filled out. Harry began to breathe easier.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

While Harry settled in rapidly at his new school, very little remained settled in Britain or at Hogwarts. Just before the noon meal on that Sunday, Dumbledore learned that Harry had left Hogwarts. He had to grit his teeth, smile, and sit through lunch all the while he was trying to figure out what had happened.

He used his hand signal for “emergency teacher meeting” midway through the meal. Albus needed to know what the hell had been going on in his school to send a student – Harry Potter of all students – packing less than two full weeks into term.

After everyone gathered in the anteroom, he began to speak. “I just learned that Harry Potter has left Hogwarts and plans for an education elsewhere, magical or Muggle I know not.”

Snape was the first to snipe. Dumbledore decided to cut through the hippogriff manure. He whipped out his wand and cast Legilimens at Severus. He wanted to see Severus’ interactions with the Potter boy. And Albus was disgusted at what he saw, not just with Potter but with other students, young, old, it didn’t matter. Severus had cost him Potter!

“Severus, don’t ever do that again, not to a Potter, a Longbottom, or a Weasley, not to anyone in any of your classes. Never taunt them; never mock them; teach them what they need to know to succeed and be safe. You’re on probation for one year. I won’t hesitate to find you alternate work, do you hear me? The Ministry could have you testing cauldron bottom thicknesses from a room in the dungeon if I had your teaching credentials revoked – or your Potions Mastery suspended. And you will never have students in your private office or quarters again, especially not your godson. I’ll set up the wards myself.”

None of the staff, save Minerva and Severus, had ever heard the cold, calculating, angry side of Dumbledore. None of them ever wanted to hear it again. A few were shivering.

Severus was shivering and pale. The other teachers had heard the rumors and now they’d more or less been confirmed by Dumbledore.

A few identified with him, they had desires, too, but none of them would be comforting Severus Snape any time soon.

“Now, who else can tell me anything? I refuse to believe that Mr. Potter left just because of our resident Potions Master. Anything?”

Flitwick had nothing. None of the other teachers remembered more than meeting the kid. McGonagall, though, was uncharacteristically silent. “Those letters, Albus. Could something have come in to upset Potter with those letters you didn’t redirect to the mail room?”

Albus was grateful for the clue, but wished his Deputy Headmistress hadn’t discussed that particular aspect of Dumbledore’s plans in such a public place.

It had been foolish not to transfer the owl wards to Hogwarts as soon as Harry Potter had arrived at King’s Cross. But Albus was old and sometimes details slipped.

“Did you never inquire, Minerva?”

She shook her head. Albus wanted to swear, but didn’t.

“I already had the elves check his room. There was nothing there but a brief letter explaining that he’d left. This won’t do. Harry Potter needs to be at Hogwarts. I have plans for him, err, to educate him just like every other student. No other school would do as good a job...”

No one believed his slip cover up, least of all Minerva.

“He needs to be here, under our influence and instruction...” And control, Dumbledore thought, but didn’t say. “Who knows what he’ll get up to outside our walls?”

Minerva broke in again. “Albus, I really do think this had something to do with those owls. Harry seems smart enough. He would have to wonder about receiving so much mail and then no more. Do you think he’d go looking or asking questions?”

Dumbledore looked thoughtful and then blanched pure white. He ran out of the antechamber and only Minerva followed him. The other teachers were well glad to be out of Albus' presence.

Dumbledore ran to a room in the dungeons and undid the wards to allow himself entrance. What he saw inside was...nothing. There should have been tens of thousands of letters and packages in here. Instead, nothing at all.

"Mipsy!"

The small house elf appeared in the room. "Professor," she said, dipping low to the ground out of habit.

"Where are all the letters? What did you do with them?"

"I has helped the young Master to read and sort his mail. He being done with the letters of acknowledgement, too. Well-mannered young wizard, Professor, sir."

"Why did you help him? This room was a secret!"

"Master Harry was asking about his mail. It was being my duty to assist the young master."

"No, your duty is to me and the school, elf, not to some 'young master.' This means clothes, Mipsy."

She bowed again. The almost Slytherin house elf already had plans in mind.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter looked up from his book on wizarding culture when he felt someone enter his room. He looked behind him and saw Mipsy. "Why are you here?"

"Dumbledore gave me clothes. I'm free."

“You don’t sound sad, so congratulations, I guess. But, why are you here?”

“Mipsy will be looking after young master’s mail and other requirements now...”

She disappeared before Harry had a chance to protest.

“Great. I left Hogwarts but I still have a Hogwarts house elf who thinks she belongs to me and my mail.” He snorted a bit and then returned to reading on the basic facts of the wizarding world. Harry wished he’d known much of this information as soon as Hagrid told him he was a wizard. And why hadn’t Flourish and Blotts sold a book like this?

The Scoil had supplied all of his books as part of the course fees. This small, slim book was easily the most fascinating thing Harry had ever seen.

Harry decided he was going to like Ireland. It was a nice school. He’d already learned tons on a weekend day. He’d met a couple guys around his age and they seemed nice and not at all impressed by his scar. It was perfect.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It was early Monday morning. Potter had been missing for one day. No one outside Hogwarts knew yet, even the students didn’t exactly know. Albus had spent hours yesterday and through the night consulting his trinkets and performing two dozen spells. The boy was obviously under heavy wards, very heavy ones.

So, he’d opted to attend a magical school or enroll in some form of apprenticeship with a paranoid sort of wizard.

Today, Albus was going to check the usual suspects. He’d already cleared Moody and Proudfoot last night. Neither had taken in any young apprentices who would be better off at Hogwarts.

First stop, Prawley Day School.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry was breathing hard and feeling the pain of his first session of Physical Education. They'd been out running in the grass surrounding the school. It had felt wonderful. Harry had, of necessity, become quite a gifted sprinter earlier in his life but, oddly, also had the stamina to run for longer distances.

He walked back to his room and collapsed into the shower. Things were so different here already. So different, so...peaceful.

He went through his day quickly. He especially enjoyed his first flying lesson from the Flying Team that afternoon.

"Most of you young'uns have been here a while. You know the safety procedure and have done some basic back and forth flying. Potter here just showed up, so we'll cut him some slack. Everyone call your brooms and mount up."

He'd never felt such freedom in the air. He did the safety lesson quickly, particularly as he didn't seem given to falling off his own broom, and caught up with the others who were learning some of the basics of 'swift breaking.' Then he learned about how to change direction in the air. Finally, as everyone else looked a bit tired, they decided to do a quick drill to improve Quidditch skills. The fifth year who ran the Flying Team lobbed golf balls into the air and had the first years attempt to catch them.

None of the ones pitches towards Harry hit the ground. He caught them all, even ones that his neighboring compatriots were bound to let fall.

"Should be a good year for pick up games. Potter seems like he has quite an eye, might be a good seeker. We'll do a Keeper/Chaser drill next week: ball's bigger and it might suit some of you better than this little drill. Not everyone's meant to catch the Snitch."

Harry smiled. He really loved flying. He decided to get into Dublin on the holiday and buy his own broom.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Albus Dumbledore wasn't having a good day. He'd checked the nine magical day schools in Britain before taking an international portkey to Beauxbatons.

Nothing. Nothing at all.

It was like Harry had literally disappeared. Poof and he was gone.

He sat down, finally back in his office, and tried to sort through all of the relevant facts. Harry realized his mail had been denied him. He somehow realized that he shouldn't say anything about it to the staff or even his friends. Then he saw something in the mail that encouraged him to leave. It couldn't be a cursed object, the mail wards would have seen to that. What kind of letter would be good enough to persuade Harry to leave...

Albus frowned. A letter from them. Them. That blasted Scoil. They'd poached more than a few of the brightest intended for Hogwarts. Albus had had to personally go and re-persuade more than a handful of eleven-year-olds, including one young witch named Lily Evans many years ago.

Albus had tried to find the place dozens of times, mostly out of curiosity, some out of pique. He stumbled from his office and began searching the Hogwarts castle and grounds for portkey residue. It'd be more than a full day old by now, but it might still be useful.

Dumbledore used his magic sensing skills and quickly found himself standing at the outer gates of the grounds. Harry had used his portkey here, it seemed. Albus gathered up the remaining magical essence from the portkey and then followed behind its trail.

He landed with a jarring shudder in the middle of a rather dark forest. And his magic sensing skills were going crazy. They could detect Harry everywhere. Literally everywhere. Albus got up, almost against his will, and began to wander the forest calling out for Harry Potter.

It would be four days before he stopped doing it. That was when he collapsed in utter exhaustion with a severe case of dehydration. The leprechauns who came across this wizard in their forest took some pity on the old food. Had no one counseled him about not ever going questing on leprechaun lands? Lesser mortals often went insane.

They drug him to the edge of a clear lake and dropped him in. They had a good laugh before they toddled off into the twilight.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry made it through his Latin and French lessons on Saturday and then went to take a quick nap before lunch. He'd never worked this hard in his life. He was tired all the time from the exercise, the magic, the constant thinking, and the homework. The neverending homework. But he wasn't unhappy. Tired, yes. Stretched thin, always. Always busy. But not unhappy.

He'd done well in his first round of tutorials and liked most of his teachers. A few seemed indifferent to teaching at all, but Harry didn't mind them. He'd work around their incompetence. None of them actively went after Harry like Snape had. None of them bored him to sleep like Binns had.

He'd also struck up a few friendships with a few boys his age and slightly older – and a continued few correspondences with folks back in Britain who could seem to hold an intelligent conversation by owl post. Hedwig and Mipsy had been busy receiving and delivering mail this week, particularly once Harry and then Dumbledore went missing. Witches and wizards apparently thought they could fix everything with poorly spelled letters and ancient owls.

Harry suspected that his former Headmaster was now trying to track him down. He should have felt nervous, but he didn't. Instead of nerves, he felt something else.

Harry was beginning to be able to consider that he might actually be safe and secure in his new surroundings.

It was an odd feeling as he passed out for an hour's nap. He might actually be happy.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The first of October hit Albus Dumbledore like a sledgehammer. He had lost and failed to recover Harry Potter, the suspect teacher Quirinus Quirrell had been eaten by Hagrid's dog Fluffy during Dumbledore's extended absence, and now Dumbledore was trying to teach Defence, recruit a new teacher, and strengthen the protections for the Stone (but not make it so hard that three determined first-year students couldn't make it through the course). And he also continued searching for Harry Potter.

Merlin on high!

And this particular day was especially awful because Albus needed Cornelius Fudge's assistance. And Dumbledore hated stupid people, especially stupid people who'd stumbled into powerful situations. Thus he loathed Cornelius Fudge. He'd initially deigned to assist Fudge once he'd become Minister for the simple reason that stupid people didn't dig into things they shouldn't in most cases. Fudge deviated from the average: he was dumb and curious and very vocal (especially when bribed by Lucius Malfoy). Dumbledore had already planned out how Fudge would simply 'disappear' one day with a good chunk of the Ministry's funds. No one knew exactly where Bagnold had gone after her term in office, did they? Dumbledore decided to push forward his plans.

"Cornelius, let's discuss getting young Harry back on British soil, should we?"

"About time, Dumbledore. Prophet's been screaming about this for almost two weeks now. "Boy-Who-Lived Flees Britain and Hogwarts; Snape on Probation." What kind of a school are you running there, Albus?"

The headmaster shook his head. That wasn't what he wanted to get into right now.

“Enough, Cornelius. You need a start a suit with the ICW asking for Harry to return to Britain. I’ll push it through once we receive it, then this will all be taken care of...”

“Hold on, Albus. If it were this easy, you’d have already done it. What are you keeping back?”

Albus swore mentally. Damn Fudge for growing a brain at a most inconvenient time.

“Well, I suspect that he’s decided to attend the Scoil ar Draiocht Glas...”

“Oh, ho, Dumbledore. Wanted to make a fool out of me, did you? If he’s really there, you’re not getting him back until Christmas at the earliest...and that’s even if we win against the Irish, bloody tricky bastards. Swear every one of them is part-Leprechaun if I didn’t know better.”

Dumbledore wasn’t feeling all that charitable about leprechauns at the present moment, but he did keep quiet.

It took Albus Dumbledore thirty minutes to convince Cornelius Fudge to draw up the papers. Then he worked closely with the three Ministry officials who did the work to be sure every propriety, rule, and regulation was followed. Getting bounced out of the ICW court on a technicality was an almost everyday occurrence. Dumbledore himself was guilty of bouncing a slew of annoying or unfavorable petitions for incorrect formatting or improper ink usage or failure to adhere to the proper format.

Rules, after all, were past, present, and future of every bureaucrat. Albus loved playing those games from time to time. Now he would use his knowledge to get him what he wanted.

Albus wanted Harry Potter at Hogwarts.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter was learning his first offensive jinx. The leg-locker. He was about to have a bit of a duel with a fellow classmate, Sean O'Keefe. They had dodging, running, and the leg-locker as options. The first one to fall – for whatever reason – won the duel.

Neither boy had perfected the casting of the jinx before they arrived at class. Harry had spent an hour at the practice room trying to get it, but it wouldn't come.

However, when his blood was pumping after dodging half-formed wisps of Sean's jinx, Harry had his first breakthrough. He said the words, waved his wands, and the jinx flew out of the wand. Sean was down about a minute into the duel.

His instructor pulled Harry aside later. "I'd wager, Mr. Potter, that you're going to be better in high adrenaline situations than you would be in an academic casting environment. I'd suggest partnering up when you try spells, especially offensive and defensive ones. If you make it seem real, your magic is likely to respond better and more forcefully. It'll probably speed your learning up..."

Harry grinned at the suggestion. It was completely brilliant.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry was mortified. The lecturer was delivering a 'Survey of Recent European Wizarding History' and had touched on the Dark Lord Voldemort for five minutes. Harry's name had come up more than once. Harry tried to disappear by slumping down in his seat before he became a bit angry. The lecturer finally started to talk about things that Harry knew were wrong.

"While the Ministry has not revealed where Harry Potter grew up, most conjecture points toward a minor wizarding family outside Britain to preserve the boy's anonymity and ensure his safety..."

Here Harry did sit back up in his seat. He raised his hand to ask a question, but it was quite a few moments before the lecturer noticed him.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but your information is wrong. I grew up with Muggle relatives in Britain...”

“Very funny, young man. Harry Potter went to Hogwarts. It was in the papers...”

“Excuse me, again, ma’am. But Harry Potter – me – left Hogwarts and came here. I’ve been here for eleven weeks now...”

The lecturer scoured Harry’s features and eventually noticed his scar. Her eyes grew wide.

“Oh, I see. I hadn’t heard, been busy at my research you see...”

Harry stopped listening to the woman after that. So did many of his fellow classmates. If she couldn’t keep up on current events, such as Harry coming to the Scoil, how could they trust the rest of her facts?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

“Happy Winter Holiday, young Mr. Potter. Would you like some tea or some hot chocolate?”

“No, thank you, sir.”

“Alright, then. Straight to business. I’ve had excellent reports from all your tutors, Harry, very well done. You are cleared to continue on for another term.”

Harry appeared to already have suspected this. Still, he grinned. He was such a happy, pleasant child. Given his background, Orion couldn’t help but feel surprised every time the thought occurred to him.

“Thank you sir.”

“How did you find your classes?”

“Most of them were wonderful. I remember you mentioning that Charms is a favorite class for most beginning students. I believe you were correct. I also particularly enjoyed the Introduction to Wizarding Culture...”

“As you probably should, Harry. You are the first Muggle-raised or muggle-born wizard we’ve had at the school in thirty years. Quite a few of the ones we invited were poached away by the other, larger schools. Muggles seem to equate the size of the school with the quality of the education provided; not sure why that is exactly. Still, I’m quite sure the Introduction was very helpful. So, before we talk about next term, I wonder if you’d share with me your other highlights?”

“Well, the non-magical classes were very good. I’ve gotten loads better at learning new spells. The tutor in my English course finally taught me how to write an essay, sir. No one else had ever explained it well before...” Harry was glad to talk for almost ten minutes on his progress. He’d become quite the little scholar, given the proper environment.

“And what are your thoughts about next term, Mr. Potter?”

“Well, I know I get to start laboratories for science. That sounds fun. And all my other classes stay the same. It sounds fine to me.”

“And how are you finding two languages?”

“It’s helpful. Getting better at Latin is helping me with my French...”

The Headmaster smiled. He had a prize here. He just needed to keep expanding and challenging young Potter. More courses, harder courses. He’d have a word with the boy’s tutors to speed up the usual curricula. Orion suspected the boy would do very well. He would be truly gifted by the time he was fourteen.

“I have found a tutor for your Parseltongue skills. It’ll just be a few hours during the term, I think, with no papers or anything. Very informal. Just to help you master your skills. I am still looking for someone who can work with you on your metamorphmagery, though.

There are so few publicly acknowledged in the world right now. One just graduated from Hogwarts, but she's joined the British Ministry of Magic as an Auror Trainee. Perhaps I'll ask around in China and India."

Harry smiled. Harry had only met the Headmaster twice, but he felt that the man was a good one, doing the right things. He was friendly and offered good advice and he'd gone out of his way to make Harry feel at home.

"And your plans for the vacation? Are you staying at the school?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, for most of term. I plan to spend a few days visiting my friend Victor at the New Year, though. And maybe during the next break I can catch a professional Quidditch game. The Flying Team is awesome, Professor..."

Yes, Harry was doing very well.

"I did have one thing to address with you, Mr. Potter."

"Oh?" He didn't seem nervous.

"Your former Headmaster pulled some strings to have a lawsuit against the Scoil brought before the ICW...."

Here Harry began to turn a bit pale.

"Don't worry. I produced the writ of sanctuary, along with the supporting evidence. Instead of just giving it to the ICW so it could disappear or be destroyed (such a bastion of corruption), I gave several copies out. The Irish press began eating Britain and Hogwarts alive. The British Ministry not checking on your welfare all those years; those horrible Muggles; the Headmaster setting owl wards without your consent or knowledge, then hiding your mail inside the dungeons of his school. They thought they were being clever using the ICW to do their dirty work. They just look like thugs now. Actually, they're in fear you'll actually show your face and pull out some pensieve testimony to make everyone look even worse..."

Harry laughed.

“So, the moral of the story is that Dumbledore is playing games still. Be sure to take precautions when you’re outside of the school. And perhaps you want to see if there are any books in the library on metamorph magic that you haven’t already checked out. You might try experimenting to see what you can achieve, eh?”

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Albus downed his third Firewhiskey of the evening. It had been a hellacious term. He’d only just managed to secure the services of a new DADA instructor for the following term and he wasn’t feeling too comfortable with the candidate. The only candidate after months of looking (after all, who wanted to follow in the footsteps of a man who’d been eaten by a three-headed dog?): Lockhart, Gilderoy. Albus had gone back and looked at his personal notes of former students. The boy had been a middling student thirty years ago, now he was a famous author and destroyer of dark creatures. But it didn’t add up to Albus. And it wasn’t as if he could take a peek and see; the man had quite firm Occlumency protections in place. The biggest problem was that couldn’t pass the brief practical examination Albus had given him. How could the man honestly teach NEWT-level defence if he couldn’t form an adequate Shield Charm or use basic Transfiguration in a defensive scenario? Of course, Albus hadn’t said that Lockhart had failed the exam, but it should have been obvious. Still Albus gave the man a six-month contract. He knew it would come back to bite him.

Albus sighed. Merlin’s heavenly mess, even this Lockhart would be better than Albus continuing to teach the young monsters. He’d forgotten how utterly exhausting they were, how needy, how completely unschooled. Forty-plus years out of the classroom had taught Albus it was foolish to walk back inside one. Good riddance!

He slugged back his glass before realizing it was empty. He’d need another one before he could think about the drubbing he’d received at the ICW. He’d been caught, actually caught, in four illegal actions. Worse yet, it hadn’t been swept under the carpet. No, the Irish papers reported it. Albus was no longer a senior executive of the ICW. He’d only just survived a vote of no-confidence in the Wizengamot here in

Britain. And the Board of Governors was grumbling. They'd scheduled six meetings during the next term, like they wanted to be around Hogwarts constantly to spy on Albus Dumbledore.

Why had Harry gone? Why? It made all this so much harder. Albus had plans that required the boy. He needed to be back within Albus' firm guidance.

How to do it? How to get around that blasted Scoil? Albus needed someone with legal standing...oh, no. Albus could only think of a single person. He took a look at the mostly empty bottle and knocked the rest back again.

Harry Potter's legal guardian, as appointed in his parents' will. Harry Potter's godfather.

Sirius Black. Albus now needed Sirius Black. This was going to be rough.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry was eating dinner with a few of his friends when Mipsy brought Hedwig into the dining hall. Ordinarily owls were allowed only with the students' rooms. For Mipsy to do this meant the owl's message was very important.

"What do you have for me, girl?"

Harry removed the message from his owl and set to reading it. It seemed to be from someone called Sirius Black, a man who was claiming to be Harry's godfather. He briefly explained his friendship with Harry's father and mother – and his years unlawfully imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit. He asked to meet with Harry.

Harry walked over to his Headmaster's table and politely asked if he could speak with the man.

"Of course. Please take a seat. How may I help you, young Master Potter?"

“Sir, I just received this letter. It sounds genuine.”

Harry pushed the parchment across the table.

Orion Murphy-Black continued eating for a few moments before he dropped his fork. “I knew Sirius. Oh my. Oh Merlin. Innocent, denied a trial ten years earlier. This sounds like a bad Muggle book, the Count of Monte Cristo or something. Sirius was my distant relation, a seventh cousin twice removed or something like that. I met Lily Evans, your mother, through him.”

“Was he really my godfather?”

“I don’t know, Harry. I knew he went to Azkaban and I could never quite believe he would do the things he was accused of doing...but sent to prison without a trial. That’s got to be one of the very worst things to have happen. At the very least, I will send him the names of a couple excellent law wizards.”

“But, it sounds like he wants to meet me, sir.”

The Headmaster nodded. “I think it could be a good idea, Harry.”

“Sir?”

“Yes, meet with him when term ends. I’d recommend corresponding with them until then. It’s possible he’s been fed a lot of lies by the people who just released him. It does seem a touch convenient, the timing of all this. He sits in a cell for ten years before anyone realizes he’d never been tried; then they try him and discover he’s actually innocent? This is more of Dumbledore’s mess, but at least you can benefit from it. The Sirius I knew was a very interesting person, brash, funny, intensely loyal, but a touch cruel. Perhaps the years have softened him a bit – or, unfortunately, perhaps they’ve hardened him. His writing you a letter is a good sign. I would write back, young Harry.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry smiled, got up from the table, and ran out of the dining hall. He obviously wanted to start his letter right now. He'd never really met anyone who could tell him about his parents. Dumbledore and McGonagall probably could have, but never tried.

That first letter from Sirius spawned a near daily stream of correspondence between the pair. There was nothing important in the letters: Harry's report on his schooling and a few questions he wanted to ask; Sirius' stories about Harry's parents and some return questions.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sirius Black sat at a table in a Muggle café in central Dublin. It was a nice spring day. It was even nicer that Sirius Black was a free man – and that his lawyers were shredding the British Ministry of Magic into ribbons. Sirius wanted them to pay as much as he could squeeze out of them...so that he could promptly and very publicly donate all of it to charity. St. Mungo's. St. Echidna's Magical Orphanage. The Veteran Auror's Debilitation Fund. The Strife Relief Fund. Scoil ar Draiocht Glas, which was currently educating his godson. None of it would directly benefit the Ministry of Magic, Hogwarts, Dumbledore, or his Order of the Phoenix. All of them had left Sirius to rot. All of them could go straight to Dis and beg for mercy.

Sirius was a smart man. He read the winds when he released. He saw why Dumbledore had suddenly remembered about him. He knew they wanted Harry the second Dumbledore ever so casually mentioned that Harry Potter had elected to attend school in Ireland. Then he got confirmation after confirmation in what had happened before and after his 'trial.'

Sirius wasn't having any more of Dumbledore's nonsense. He wanted to be with his godson, to help educate him, to protect him. The way he should have done years ago. Sirius had been an Auror. There was no good reason for him to have handed his responsibility to that half-giant Hagrid. No reason. Had he been in his right mind – and thinking of the future and not the painful immediate past, not dwelling on revenge for James and Lily – Sirius would never have done it. Sirius would have taken Harry and left Peter the Rat to Ministry justice.

Dumbledore, Hagrid, McGonagall. These were the people who had placed Harry with those 'relatives' of his. They were on Sirius Black's list.

Sirius wondered what Harry was like now. Did he look like James had? Or more like Lily? Was he kind, funny – or had the Muggles ruined the Potter essence inside him? Sirius felt his stomach clench.

From the letters Sirius had exchanged with his godson, he was sure that Harry was quite bright and enthusiastic. He was planning on attending his first Quidditch match in a few days, but reported he was pretty decent on a broom from the informal lessons he'd been taking.

Sirius was ripped from his thoughts when a mousy haired young man stepped in front of Sirius' table.

"Mr. Black?"

"Yes, do I know you?"

"I'm in disguise, Mr. Black, but I'm the one you're waiting to meet, I think."

Sirius clamped his mouth shut before he could shout out, "Harry Potter." Then he nodded his head a few times. "Very smart, even devious."

"I'm going to walk away now. You follow behind me in two minutes. We'll wind up at the park near the river."

Sirius had to forcibly restrain himself from hugging his godson before the boy walked away. Because of the disguise, he looked nothing like James. But, he sounded like him. He had the same smile, even. Oh Merlin.

Sirius got up, dropped a few bills on the table, and followed along behind. He purposely stopped at a few store windows to admire this or that trinket. But he never lost sight of his godson. It was fun, this little game they were playing. Sirius didn't think he had anyone tailing

him in Ireland, but he wouldn't put it past Dumbledore. If he did? Well, it might be Moody, but not in a heavily Muggle area like this. How many Muggles had peg legs, scarred faces, and magical whirling eyes?

He saw Harry stop and sit down on a park bench. Sirius didn't waver in his concentration on arriving at that bench. A few minutes later, Sirius took a seat as well.

"Can you cast some 'Notice-Me-Not' charms, Mr. Black?"

"Yes, I can. And, please, call me Sirius."

"Thank you," Harry said.

"Oh, wow, Harry. I don't know what to say. I've thought about you probably every day since you were born and this is the first time we get to meet since you were a toddler, on a park bench in Dublin. I'm so happy to be free again...and that you agreed to write to me and then to meet with me..."

"I didn't even know you existed, Mr. Black, until I got your letter. A lot in my life hasn't been my choice. A lot has been hidden from me. And you were just the kind of person I've always wanted to meet: someone who knew my parents, someone who could tell me what they were like. My Aunt Petunia..."

"I know, Harry. I got the whole story. I am so angry about that I'm still swearing..."

Harry gave a polite laugh for Sirius' efforts at lightening the situation.

"...I met that vile woman twice in my life and I can comfortably say I'd never volunteer to be in the same room as her, let alone the same house."

Harry nodded his head. He seemed to prefer not speaking about the Dursley family.

“So, how has your schooling gone? Leaving Hogwarts seems to have made you quite happy.”

“They don’t care about my fame here, Sirius. I’m just a regular student here. It’s nice. I’m good at Charms and Defense. I’m becoming a pretty good flier. And I get to do all my old subjects from when I was younger plus learn magic. We learned about leprechauns and dragons this past term – I really liked the dragons. They had two Welsh Greens and a Hebridean Black. During the summer break, I plan to go to Romania with some other students to the dragon preserve. They have Horntails, Ironbellies, Short-Snouts, Longhorns, and Opaleyes, I think. I really, really like dragons...”

Here Harry sounded like James. Full of enthusiasm, full of curiosity and wonder, full of life.

“...and Charms is still my favorite magical class. My tutor tells me I’m very gifted. He’s put me on an accelerated schedule. I learn two to four new charms a week – I have more homework for that class than any two others – but I really love it. The Dueling class is starting to get good finally – some spells we can use, simple ones like a Leg-Locker and a Tickler. But it could eventually be my overall favorite. I’m going to join the Dueling Club next year for sure. I start Herbology next term. I’m pretty good with a garden, living with the Dursleys taught me that much and how to cook, too, so it should be fun. And...”

Sirius almost flinched when Harry brought up the Dursleys again. He could feel the pain conveyed in his words. He could almost taste the loathing, fear, and hatred his godson felt toward them. How had that happened – their cruelty – how had it happened under the noses of the neighbors, the schools, the police? Did no one notice? Or did Vernon and Petunia spread some sort of lie to cover their abuse and neglect?

“...I’m very curious as to how they grow things where the school is situated. Must be magical somehow...”

“Why does that make you curious?”

Harry obviously wanted to say more, but found he couldn't. He closed his mouth and then reopened it.

"You'll find no one can speak of the Scoil past a certain level of detail. It's a secrecy ward of some sort. To know more, you'd need an invitation to visit, Sirius, I'm sorry."

"Don't be, Harry. I do have such an invitation and I plan to meet with the Headmaster, a man I knew years ago, in a few days..."

"Why?"

"For honesty's sake, I'll come right out and tell you that I want to keep an eye on you. I was stupid when I went after the real traitor just after your parents died. I should have been worried about my godson, about you, Harry. As for staying at the school, I think I should have something to fill my days with, too. I'm the last of my family left alive – an old, old, very wealthy family – and I'd like to do something to give it a better name. So I think I'll pursue a Mastery in Ancient Runes and Warding and take on a career, reconnect with people through a profession. It won't be that easy, after all those years in that hellhole, but I want to try..."

Harry, for the first time, seemed genuinely happy.

"What did the Hogwarts Headmaster tell you to do, Sirius?"

"Oh, him. Well, he finally remembered that I existed. So he decided to use my status as your godfather to his advantage. He arranged a show trial for me – to get me out of prison not through facts, but through trickery. They were going to claim, correctly, that I'd never received a trial and, without revealing exactly what happened, push through a measure saying that I had to be released. The Wizengamot didn't buy it: more than half of them demanded that I account for my 'crimes,' so I received something of a trial in an open session of the Wizengamot. Weren't they surprised when I told them the truth: my one-time friend Peter Pettigrew betrayed my friends – your parents, Harry –, I went after him for justice, he framed me a second time and disappeared, then Dumbledore and Fudge come along to play games with me...to 'free' me from Azkaban and then impose harsh

conditions on my probation. One of them would have been to ensure that I sue for your return, Harry. Weren't those old idiots surprised when the truth came out? Dumbledore lost his leadership role and even his seat on the Wizengamot. Fudge was tossed out a few days later in the public uproar. Fickle and oblivious they may be most of the time, no witch or wizard ever likes to think he or she could be illegally sent to someplace as horrible as Azkaban. In those events, they saw themselves in me; they saw the things that could happen to them as they had happened to me. They saw Dumbledore playing Merlin with a man's life, ordering me about like I was a puppy dog. We use harsh punishments in our world, Harry, and we demand even harsher punishments when we find our confidence abused..."

"Oh." Harry didn't know what to think about Sirius' ranting version of an explanation. He'd been a member of the British Wizarding World for less than three months. "What can you tell me about my parents, Sirius?"

"Oh, Harry." Sirius' anger deflated as he struggled to stop laughing, to stop the tears of joy flowing down his face. "Harry, I could tell you stories for a month and a day and never scratch the surface. Let's start, though, at the beginning... I was a surly little sprog when I crawled on the Hogwarts Express..."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"...so, we find ourselves again at the end of term, young Master Potter. What do you have planned for the break?"

"Well, Headmaster, Sirius and I plan to take in some Quidditch. I saw a couple games last break and now we'll see a lot more. And go flying together. And quietly visit Black Manor in London before Sirius sells it off. He likes the Black Estate in County Cork much better. 'Fewer bad memories,' he says. Then I'm going with some friends from the Creatures Club to Romania. On the way back, I'm stopping in Bulgaria to speak with a woman who I've been corresponding with. She has a niece who is a metamorphmagus. I thought it might be helpful to speak with her."

Orion Murphy-Black just nodded. They were detailed, extraordinary plans he heard. Even on break, the young scholar continued to learn. Such a bright young man – what a brilliant future he held within his grasp.

“I take it your godfather is also going along?”

“I don’t think I’d be able to leave his sight. He seems rather protective of me, sir.”

“Oh, yes, I think his new found interest in warding is because of you, too. He wants to be prepared to help you. And wards can be some extremely lethal defenses...”

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment before he nodded.

“You will, of course, begin to have runes as an option in your first term next year, should you wish it. I’m sure your godfather would coach you along if you wanted, too...”

“I’ll consider it, sir. Am I also to start taking Potions?”

“Yes. It will also be time to select your sciences, maths, and other subjects. Oh, and your languages. Will you continue on with French and Latin? Or add some new ones?”

“I will continue, sir. I’d like to be orally fluent in French and able to read better in Latin before I try anything else.”

The Headmaster made notations on the paper in front of him.

“Oh, yes. I do have some information to impart, Mr. Potter. It seems there was an attempted theft at your old school. Your first Defence teacher perished a few days after you left school, and a new one began after the winter holidays. He just attempted to steal a valuable artifact from Hogwarts. Apparently the school was being used as a high security vault. From what I’ve pieced together, there were deadly animals (including a monstrous troll), deadly plants, poisons, charmed objects set to fly and impale trespassers, and some kind of animated chess board with an attitude. The teacher – who

Dumbledore claimed was possessed by an evil spirit – was trapped in the final room of this security regime. And he starved to death over the course of five weeks. People were out looking for him, but your former Headmaster never thought to check his little vault area. Dumbledore's been thrown out of Hogwarts for 'conduct unbefitting a Headmaster.' Keeping personal trinkets under that kind of security – in a school with eleven year old children – that's just asking for trouble. And losing two teachers in a year because of the damned thing, it's unconscionable. Lockhart, his name was. Wrote a lot of trashy adventure stories. Died looking at his own reflection in a mirror, if the stories are true. Always struck me as quite a vain man."

"I'm sorry about what happened at Hogwarts, but I'm not sure why you're telling me, sir."

"Albus seems obsessed for some reason...obsessed with you, Harry. I think it best we teach you a few magical precautions – such as preventing owls from finding you when you're out of the school and obscuring your magical signature – and work with you to quickly train up your metamorphic talents. Now that he no longer has a job, I expect he may try to spend more time pulling you back to Britain..."

"Why won't he come over here, sir?"

"The Irish government has declared him persona non grata for his illegal conduct at the ICW less than a year ago. They also discovered a number of Potter Family possessions among his affects at Hogwarts. The Ministry of Magic will be sending a box along soon. I'm told there was an Invisibility Cloak and a Family Grimoire among the items, plus your mother and father's wands."

Harry nodded, only mildly confused.

"Why would he have my family's things?"

"He's not saying. I suspect he wanted to dole them out to you as rewards. Behave well for him and he'd hand you the cloak. Do his bidding and he'd give you your mother's old wand. It appeared that he had quite a few family possessions in his private rooms, for a large number of families with orphaned children. A lot of old family

spellbooks and Grimoires. It seemed he never willingly returned those. He hoarded that knowledge for himself. They're being repatriated as we speak. The Ministry also found a few letters addressed to you that they'll be sending along."

Harry just felt numb. The old man had done horrible things to other children like Harry – and no one had noticed for years, for maybe decades. The British were imbeciles. Harry washed himself of them in that instant. He decided to even have Sirius write Gringotts and have all of his vaults and everything moved to Ireland. Apparently the goblins had a form of magic that allowed the entire vault to be moved without even opening it.

"Thank you, sir."

Harry and the Headmaster spent several more minutes discussing Harry's next term before Harry's curiosity got the better of him.

"Sir, back to your earlier story, what was the Professor – Lockhart, you said – attempting to steal?"

"Oh." The Headmaster laughed. "Nicholas Flamel's Philosopher's Stone."

"Sir, why's that funny? I've read something about it somewhere. It's supposed to be a powerful bit of alchemy. It can grant one..."

"Immortality, the story goes. Well, that story is a lie. The Philosopher's Stone is, very simply, the single greatest prank played in the last six hundred years."

Harry looked deeply skeptical.

"Sir?"

"Oh, yes, the stone is but a bit of oddly shaped garnet, not even worth seven galleons on the open market. And Nicholas Flamel has been dead for five hundred twenty-three years. His children, grandchildren, and other descendents have kept the prank going. Nicholas left that as his dying wish – along with many, many years worth of the

collected hairs off his head. They've been using Polyjuice all this time to make it seem like Nicholas was still alive. Every few years 'Nicholas' would start up a new written correspondence with someone in the wizarding world, then have a meeting every once in a while, just to prove he was still alive. I believe Dumbledore met with 'Flamel' four times over sixteen years and had a few dozen letters from him – and it features prominently on his Chocolate Frog card as a defining partnership in Dumbledore's career. Now, that's a truly incredible prank, isn't it?"

Harry couldn't stop laughing for a long time.

"Oh, yes, I'm one of the few people ever to discover the truth. I'm an honorary member of Clan Flamel because of it. Keep that to yourself, won't you, Harry?"

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Albus Dumbledore was quite angry – and depressed. He'd gotten caught so many times this past year. No one had ever caught him out before. Now he was finished. He felt old – and useless – and weak.

That Scoil. The damned Irish. The unmerciful prigs at the ICW. None of them played by Albus Dumbledore's rules. 1) Albus got whatever he wanted because it was for the greater good. 2) People looked the other way at Albus' transgressions because Albus was a great man doing important work. 3) No one questioned Albus Dumbledore.

The rules no longer worked.

Albus no longer had political influence. He no longer had a school to run, children to mold. He was old and dead. His days of playing the greatest game in history were over.

He sobbed for a second. Harry Potter had been back in the wizarding world for less than a year and everything Albus had spent decades preparing was destroyed. The boy hadn't lifted more than a finger – he'd just left Hogwarts – and then the rest of the world fell on Albus' shoulders and crushed him. It wasn't fair.

He grumbled and stewed for a long time, then he seemed to undergo an almost physical transformation. He let go of the pity and the sense of worthlessness. He didn't have political power, true, but Albus was a powerful wizard, not as all-mighty as his reputation suggested, but powerful still.

He was back to being the Albus Dumbledore.

He had work to do. He had the Shrieking Shack to clean, as he couldn't go too far away from his school. He had Harry Potter to find and abduct. Now, it was a different story, the boy wouldn't be returning to Hogwarts. No, Albus would bind the boy to a ten-year Apprenticeship with him. That should do the trick.

Harry needed to learn. He needed to be strong, but not too strong. Not happy, but not beaten bloody and abused into worthlessness – somewhere in the middle. But most of all he needed to be humble. Selfless. Generous. Giving. Harry needed to willingly die for the light. That was critical. The world was lost if Harry Potter didn't willingly surrender his life.

And he wouldn't be willing if he kept on at that blasted Scoil. That had destroyed all of Dumbledore's plans.

Harry needed to be prepared. The Dursleys couldn't have been more perfect in their hatred of the boy. It had been exactly what was needed.

Now, it was all in ruins. Dumbledore began to plot. He had Harry Potter to mold into a willing sacrifice. The cogs in his mind began to spin.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter's Second Year

A/N: Increased level of violence in this chapter, description of Harry being beaten, as well. Harry's second year is far darker than his first, but it's still better than Hogwarts. I make no apologies for the cliffhanger at the end, but you are forewarned.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"My god, Sirius, did you see that? It just devoured an entire cow in two bites."

Harry was acting more like a six year old than the twelve year old he was. This was, by his own admission, only his second trip to a zoo of any kind. And the first one hadn't been devoted to dragons.

"Of course, Harry. It's bigger than the house where your 'relatives' live."

At that Harry began to laugh. They'd been at the dragon preserve in Romania for nearly two hours now and Harry was still finding things to marvel about.

"Shall we join one of the guided tours?"

"Sure. Maybe we can get some good stories out of the tour leader..."

Sirius liked Harry's curiosity and his scheming mind. He knew what he wanted and could usually find a way to get it.

The pair joined up with the others from the Scoil who had come on the Creatures Club-arranged tour. Harry and Sirius were detouring after this to Bulgaria, but for now they were all about the dragons.

A grizzled old man, who had deep burn scarring over most of his right forearm, came out of the administration hut at the appointed time for the tour. "All right, you lot. Let's start walking. Lots of dragons to see. Might even catch the handlers feeding some of the newly hatched ones at the end of the tour. Look mighty cute, but they're certainly vicious..."

“Cute,” Harry said. “Dragons? Is he insane?”

Sirius laughed. “Might be related to Rubeus Hagrid in some way...”

“Hagrid did tell me he always wanted a dragon.”

The tour leader introduced them to seven different varieties of dragon. “They’re all so different, especially that Horntail. But, in the end, they all respond to the same things. Food, safety, rearing their own young. They also all have the same weaknesses, if you’re ever on the wrong side of an angry one. Spells are fairly useless unless aimed at the eyes or through an opened mouth; all fire spells are useless no matter where you aim. Enchanted blades can pierce dragon skin, but I’m not sure I’d want to be that close to an angry dragon. Best solution: half a dozen simultaneous stunners to the eyes and open mouth. It’ll get you thirty minutes of a sleeping dragon. If it’s just you and the dragon, tough luck. Distract it, hide from it, or (if you’re a particularly strong wizard) you could try putting it in an enchanted sleep.”

Harry considered that odd comment as he walked with the rest of the group through the reserve. That began his interest in determining how he would escape from a variety of strange and dangerous creatures and situations.

One of the dragon keepers looked sort of familiar. Sirius noticed him, too.

“That’s a Weasley if I ever saw one, Harry...”

“Right, probably one of Ron’s brothers.” He thought for a moment. “He did mention that one of them worked with dragons, I think.”

“Been in touch with anyone from Hogwarts?”

Harry shook his head. “Left that place with a foul taste in my mouth.”

Sirius frowned mildly. “I guess I understand. It’s not like I write letters to the human prison guards at Azkaban, is it?”

Moments later the group came across the ‘recently hatched dragon’ room. The conversation was mostly forgotten as Harry and Sirius stared at the crazy little monsters that, somehow, did look the slightest bit ‘cute.’

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The magical hotel Harry and Sirius had found in Sofia, Bulgaria, was rather bleak. Still, they were here for business and not pleasure. Harry had to locate a tutor for his metamorphmagical talents.

His correspondent from Bulgaria, Elizabeta Krum, had promised to introduce Harry to her son-in-law, Aleksandr Dobrydin.

He and Sirius made their way out into Sofia and eventually stumbled across the small café where he was to meet Elizabeta and Aleksandr. Both spoke English well enough to hold a conversation, and French well enough to converse with a still practicing Harry Potter. Harry liked Elizabeta more than Aleksandr. The man was a bit rough, a bit dark. But Sirius handled the negotiations. A mutually binding Oath of Secrecy, some days of training, and a payment of golden galleons.

Harry and Sirius spent the next three days almost totally in the company of Aleksandr Dobrydin. Harry wasn’t going to master his metamorph skills in three days, but he was going to be given a grounding in the things he needed to learn. He and Sirius both took nonstop notes as Aleksandr spoke. It would take months and months of practice to actually put all the training to use. ‘Years to master it all, boy, never forget. A Mastery of this material will take you years. And you don’t have years to safely learn it. Such a dilemma.’

Harry did begin the first round of exercises to access what Aleksandr called his ‘body’s magic.’

It was a series of meditative exercises. Harry had never seen anything like it. Meditation had, of course, qualified to be on a long list on ‘disapproved’ topics at the Dursley household: not to be seen on television, not to be read about in the newspaper or in The Economist,

not to be discussed within the environs of the house, not to exist at all in the Dursley's view of a perfect Little Whinging.

It took Harry most of an afternoon before he could calm his mind enough to sit still for the meditation. First Harry learned to clear his mind. He substituted all of his normal mental chatter, per Aleksandr's instructions, for a single image. Harry chose a view of Hogwarts Lake. That had been perhaps the most impressive thing he'd seen while at Hogwarts.

Aleksandr nudged Harry back to consciousness after the boy slowed his breathing and really focused on his image. "You lasted almost ten minutes. That's what you need to be doing all the time, clear out the garbage, get to know yourself. Your mind, your magic: those are the important things to a wizard, especially a powerful one, boy."

Harry next learned to take himself from a clear mind to a focused mind. He spent quite a while settling back into his view of Hogwarts Lake. Then he eventually began trying to turn the lake, per Aleksandr's instructions, into the memory of what he'd eaten for breakfast four days earlier. In his conscious mind, Harry didn't remember what he'd eaten, but Aleksandr had assured Harry it was still inside him.

It took hours before the lake gave way to the short memory.

Harry gave a whoop of joy when he came out of the trance.

"You've accessed yourself, boy, your memory. Took you plenty long, I'd say."

Sirius frowned at this. These were hard skills to learn at any age and this Dobrydin seemed more interested in making cruel remarks than in teaching.

"Now, boy, we can see about moving into accessing your magic. We'll start tomorrow. It won't feel like you've done much today other than sit and 'sleep,' but you'll find your body finds this stuff very draining at the outset. You'll sleep just fine."

It was true. Harry enjoyed the sleep of the dead. The next morning he and Sirius returned so that Harry could begin the third phase of meditation.

“Before we start, kid, I just want to caution you that you need to practice all this on your own time. You’ll need to make it easier to clear your mind, to access yourself. You’ll need to be able to do all this very quickly, even instantaneously. It’ll take months, more likely years to become truly proficient at all the exercises I’ve shown you. We’ll only be practicing four of them here and now, but I gave you more than thirty that have some value. Learn them all. Don’t just try them each once and call it done, boy. Master each of them. You have no idea of what magical power is until you can complete each of them at will...

“But, once you are skilled in each exercise, once you’ve truly mastered them all, you’ll have an impregnable mind, instant recall of any fact, event, or conversation you may desire, and control over your body’s magic. From what I can tell now, you have the ability to become a perfect mimic; you probably also have untapped potential in transfiguration generally, even the animagus transfiguration. If you stick with this, I suspect you may with time even become skilled enough with accessing you own magic to cast and control wandless magic – but you’re a long ways away from that. Metamorphic transfiguration, even the animagus transfiguration, is simpler to learn and control than even the simplest wandless levitation. So don’t push yourself too fast, right?”

Harry nodded. He was still rapidly writing down everything he’d just heard. He’d puzzle out the implications later. By the dumbfounded look on Sirius’ face, this was all important stuff.

The third meditative exercise wound up taking the entirety of their final day together. (Harry would have to learn the rest of the thirty odd exercises on his own – or return to Bulgaria later.) This was the step where Harry figured out just how much each step depended upon being skilled with the previous ones. He had to clear his mind and then transform his mind into a model of his own body. Then Harry was told to transition the model’s hair color from black to blonde – and not to make any other changes, just change the hair color.

After a half dozen failed attempts, Harry became a blonde. It took him another three hours to reverse the change, however. That's where the day went. Sirius kept a careful eye over Harry and also quizzed Aleksandr to fill in a number of details missing from his earlier exposition. Sirius was a dogged investigator.

"And what are the advantages of a non-metamorphmagus learning these techniques?"

"Almost identical to what Harry can achieve...assuming diligent practice on your part. You can perfect a clear mind, a discipline known as occlumency; you can learn the skill of mental recall of any memory you choose, even Muggles can be gifted with a form of that; you can even access your body's magic and progress down the path of mastering wandless magic. I suspect if you dedicated a few years to the pursuit, Sirius, you could become proficient..."

Sirius made notes on his Muggle lined paper. "What you're describing is nothing like how I learned the animagus transfiguration..."

Aleksandr didn't seem surprised. "People can learn a hundred ways to achieve the same thing. Different teachers prefer different methods; that's what they teach, of course. The method I suggested is not how I learned to be an animagus either, but it would have been both easier and more challenging. There would have been no potions and no partial self-transfigurations, but I would have had to master my own mind before attempting it. The other benefit, theoretically, is that one who does not lock in a form with a potion may access the spirits of several animals that one's mind and body have affinity for. I don't know that it would be true, but I suspect..."

Sirius hid his excitement as he scribbled away. Until he learned this 'perfect recall' ability, he'd have to rely upon well organized notes to help himself and Harry.

"How did you learn all this?"

"I'm afraid I can't say. Just as you will never be able to speak of how you learned this from me – it's part of the reciprocal oath we swore. I

know why you wanted to protect Harry's identity, but I wanted to protect my own as well..."

"Why?"

"All true metamorphmagi are highly sought after in the magical world. There are far more of us than anyone suspects. Some give in to temptation and become pawns of the government or this or that powerful force, Dark Lord X or Y, Generallissimo Franco or Mussolini. That most of us remain secretive about our gifts makes it harder to teach those who need instruction, but it keeps us safe from virtual 'enslavement.'"

Sirius nodded. He seemed a bit sad thinking about his cousin Nymphadora. Had she chosen to join the Ministry? Or had it been one of those Dumbledore-style 'choices' that had no other alternatives?

"What do you do, then, Mr. Dobrydin?"

"This 'Mr. Dobrydin' you speak of does nothing. It's a pseudonym I use, one of a dozen or so. This is not, of course, my real face. My real work...well, you wouldn't necessarily believe me. It's got very flexible requirements, very piecemeal-based work. High risk, very low profile, high compensation..."

"An Unspeakable?"

Aleksandr smiled. "Perhaps."

Sirius immediately dismissed the idea that Aleksandr was an Unspeakable. He wouldn't have even said 'perhaps' had he been one.

Harry groaned from the mat-covered floor. Sirius moved to be next to his godson. He noticed the boy's blond hair rippling away and dark black locks replacing it.

"He'll wake soon, Mr. Black. Then I will say my last words of advice and give you a way to contact me should you ever need to again. I will say this for your ears: he has an awesome gift, a lot of potential. I

think he'll be motivated enough to see himself through the training, but if he's not, you need to help him..."

"I've already committed myself to doing that. I'm attending a Master's program just to learn some new ways to keep him safe."

"Good, Mr. Black, very good."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry walked down the massive staircase of the Black Estate in County Cork. Sirius' guest was here apparently, but Sirius himself would be unable to let him in.

Harry walked to the door and opened it. "Mr. Lupin?"

A rather bookish man in tatty robes smiled kindly at him.

"You must be Harry?"

Harry nodded and waved the man inside.

"Is Sirius sleeping in?"

Harry smiled. "No, Sirius is paying for a prank he played on me when I was tired last night..."

"Do I want to know?"

"I'll let him tell you after he manages to free himself."

Remus Lupin laughed and he seemed to look a few years younger when he was doing it.

Harry played the host for half an hour, preparing a proper cup of tea for Mr. Lupin and serving scones, before Sirius managed to get downstairs.

"This means war, Harry."

“I took your prank last night as a declaration of war, Sirius...”

Remus goggled at the pair and began laughing.

“It’s almost like a young James and a decrepit Sirius arguing back at Hogwarts again...”

At this Sirius smiled for a moment before he faded into a more stony face.

“Who are you calling decrepit, Mooney? You look like you’ve been living in a forest...”

Remus shrugged. “For part of my life, I do, Sirius.” He looked at Harry and indicated that he didn’t want to continue this line of conversation.

“He already knows, Remus.”

“Huh?”

“I thoughtlessly handed him some of my old schoolbooks. James had basically turned one of my history books into our plan for the entire ‘Make Mooney Some Friends’ campaign...”

“You had a codename for learning the animagus transfiguration?”

“Of course. James codenamed even the act of going to the bathroom, changed it every time, too. The man might have been happier as a Muggle spy or a general planning out military campaigns...”

Remus laughed. Harry just smiled.

“So, Harry, why did I ever teach you basic warding?”

“So I’d be prepared for the world,” Harry said.

“That’s right. If you’ll remember it wasn’t for you to be able to prank your godfather was it?”

“Side benefit, I’d say.”

Sirius practically growled.

“And how did you figure out how to layer spells within wards? That’s not taught until N-level classes.”

“I read your binder of warding notes looking for something interesting. So I jumbled together an intruder ward with a mild petrification spell, a leg-locker, and a tickling charm. You walked right into when you went for your bathroom, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m getting you back. You’ll never be able to get into my room at the Scoil to do it again, Harry...but I will do the most bizarre things to you.”

Harry just smiled, as if he knew something important that Sirius didn’t.

Eventually Remus leaned over and whispered in Harry’s ear. “Aren’t you afraid? The man’s mostly insane and a certified prankster.”

Harry whispered back, “I’ve got my own house elf at the Scoil who thinks I belong to her. She’ll keep out the worst out of what Sirius does. Plus she’ll co-opt the other elves to help me get Sirius back. I’d like to see him ward his room against elves. He’d have to do his own cleaning then – and that will never happen.”

Sirius stopped his ranting when he noticed that both Harry and Remus were laughing. And Sirius hadn’t said anything funny.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Severus Snape knew his tenure at Hogwarts was drawing to a close. Minerva disliked him and his particular proclivities – but she was only Interim Headmistress as the Board of Governors was basically deadlocked on a replacement for Dumbledore.

He decided to thoroughly enjoy this final year as a teacher. He'd be free of this blasted school – and all the taxing, ridiculous children. There were only one or two per year worthy of his attentions anyway.

On the plus side, the scandal over the deaths of two morons, plus Dumbledore's ouster, would probably be enough to ensure that a number of 'students' here returned to home schooling. People had trusted Dumbledore for so long it had come as a shock to realize some of the man's true nature. Most refused to believe the man evil, but Snape knew better. Dumbledore was a touch kinder as a Master, and he didn't utilize the Unforgivables as he felt it weakened a wizard to rely on such damaging magic, but he was just as deadly, controlling, and evil as Voldemort had been.

Case in point, he'd blindly turned his head while Snape diddled his way through the more attractive younger year boys for a decade – up until Potter had fled the school for nothing more than a standard Snape verbal lashing. It had been nothing unusual or particularly harsh. Snape certainly hadn't drug out his cat o' nine tails or anything.

Hypocrite. Dumbledore wanted the boy for himself, for some political game or other he was playing. That prophecy. He wanted Potter for his games and had become bent out of all reason.

Snape thought over his last year's worth of prospects. His godson certainly was more handsome now than when he'd been seven or eight. That Blaise was rather fetching for a black boy. Snape, though, knew that the real prize would have been Potter. A broken, bleeding Potter screaming for mercy. Delicious.

The new third year boys were already turning spotty. And spots meant puberty. Nothing disgusted Severus more than beautiful boys turning into hormonal monsters.

The pick of the litter was Draco. Or perhaps there would be some fetching Muggleborn first year. They tended to scream more, but an Obliviate and a sphincter tightening charm could take care of everything after he served his 'detention.' Severus could barely wait to see.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry's second year at the Scoil started out very well. His best friend Victor shared some tales of Quidditch matches.

"Wish I could have gone. We were close to where the Vrastra Vultures play, but their matches were in Italy then."

Harry thought Victor was everything a friend should be: bright, confident, a little devilish from time to time, and funny to boot. He mentally compared his first friend at Hogwarts, Ron Weasley, to Victor O'Neil and knew that Ron would have turned into a prat. The kid at eleven was jealous of all his older brothers, his younger sister, Harry Potter, and everything else he seemed to lay eyes on. He needed a mind healer of some sort.

Harry and Victor often ended up on opposite teams during pick-up Quidditch games. Harry was excellent as a seeker and marginal as a chaser and beater. He wasn't very good as a keeper even though Victor mocked him for it. (Victor did his best work as a keeper.)

His friends made Harry happy. His godfather made Harry feel safe (as long as Sirius wasn't attempting to prank Harry somehow). And his classes made Harry feel powerful. But his academic interests had begun to change.

He'd found Charms, Jinxes, and Hexes the best subject in his first year, but the second year material – such as air cleansing charms, cleaning charms, and food preparation charms – was far different from what Harry wanted to learn and what he eventually taught himself. So, without the assistance of his tutors, Harry mastered room expansion charms, renewal charms to perpetuate the longevity of enchantments and wards, and oodles of defensive charms.

Defense, dueling, and combat became Harry's favorite subject in his second year. His stunner became strong enough to break through a medium-level shield. His banisher could send a practice dummy four meters across the room. His air gusting spells could confuse and annoy the others he sparred with in the Dueling Club. Sirius Black had taught his godson two or three image multiplication and

manipulation spells – so Harry could appear to be have a quartet of identical twins or to suddenly look like a wardrobe at the side of a room. Harry learned disillusionment. He became decent at calling forth shields, magical and physical. He learned dueling and combat tactics.

Harry learned whatever he set his mind to learning. After the advice from his odd metamorphics teacher, he tried harder in transfiguration. As he paid the subject more attention, he found he improved at it.

Harry walked out of his Potions tutorial – where he reviewed with his tutor the three potions he'd brewed for the week – and headed off to the Flying Team. Harry loved to run through the grass outside the school barefoot, but he loved to fly. He also loved it when his godfather went flying with the team. Sirius hadn't been on a broom in a long time, but he'd been a fair beater at school years earlier.

Sirius and Harry discussed plans to visit a rare bird sanctuary at the next break, winter break. The Black Mansion in London had sold, so Sirius wanted to acquire a property in France, probably along the Riviera, hence the bird sanctuary.

Harry flew back down to the lush green grass behind the Scoil and sat. Sirius joined him a few minutes later.

"Have you heard anything else on Dumbledore? I know he can't get inside the Scoil – and it would be hard for him to even come to Ireland – but do we know anything yet?"

Sirius shook his head.

"Well, I don't want to just sit here and wonder. Isn't there something we can do?"

"Like pranking one of the top five magic users in the world? We can't exactly go and steal his familiar, Harry, as I don't think a phoenix would cooperate. (Still think the books have to be wrong about phoenixes. Dumbledore has one and he's as twisted in the head as anyone I've ever known.) We can't shortsheet his bed because I haven't the slightest idea where he's staying now that he's been

removed from Hogwarts. Pranking him? No, I don't think that's a good idea, Harry."

"No, not something silly like that... Although we could probably convince some house elves in Britain to do that. He'd never catch on." Harry smiled and shook his head. "I was thinking about something else. I mean, all of his positions are gone, but he still seems to be after me. Isn't there something we can do?"

"I guess we could kidnap him and lock him in a cave..." Sirius was trying to keep a straight face.

"Er, maybe you're right. I just hate feeling helpless, Sirius..."

"You're not, Harry. You're getting stronger and more talented every day. I'm learning wards that would knock Albus out cold if he ever tried to abduct you..."

"Is that enough, Sirius? It sounds like he's messed around in nearly every magical family's private matters for the last forty years. He's stolen knowledge – and withheld it – from everyone it belonged to. He was someone people trusted, someone I was supposed to trust. It just makes me so mad, Sirius."

"I'm glad, Harry. But you deal with the anger, you don't hold onto it. Anger won't help to make you stronger. It'll make you careless and overzealous and maybe even arrogant. That will get you hurt or killed. You need to be skilled, rational, and powerful. And I know you can do it. I see it every day."

Harry sighed. "I only just got my copy of the family spellbook. Most of its way too advanced for me now, but a little bit of it works just great. I learned a new way to silence someone – they don't even know they're silenced. Could be great in a duel. Works to disarm an opponent who can't cast wordlessly and is also confusing as can be..."

Sirius laughed. He knew Harry was just venting. Getting to come to a school was exciting; having to remain in its shadows, or near to an adult, for safety's sake was annoying and confining.

“I just wish there was something...”

“I wonder.” Sirius was thinking now. “My favorite kind of pranks, Harry, were the ones I lobbed into an area then walked away from. Twenty minutes or an hour later, boom. I was well away – with a safe alibi of some sort – when the chaos started. The very best ones had the victims accusing each other of performing the prank – and then retaliating against each other far more severely than the original prank. I think there might be something we can do, it’s not much, but it might be a lot of fun...and we’ll be watching from afar. We’ll get it started, but if it works it will be self-perpetuating.”

“Okay, spill.”

“It all starts with us writing a book, a self-updating book...”

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry woke at five thirty most mornings so he’d have a bit of time to meditate before the chaos of the day started. He wanted to master his metamorphmagus talents as quickly as he could. He usually also found at least a free hour during the day or before bed to continue his studies. For as haphazard a schedule as Harry kept, he always managed to work in at least an hour, if not two, of his meditation exercises. He was becoming somewhat adept at changing basic things about his appearance, like his hair color and length. He hadn’t yet begun attempting to change the shape of his face. That was harder and Harry was waiting just a bit longer on that.

He finished his morning meditation and then threw on some muggle sweat pants. They were jogging outside in the grass barefoot this morning and then doing an obstacle course the school built in its basement. Since the thing was magical it was always a bit different every time Harry ran through it.

He ran at a fast pace for nearly fifty minutes before he noticed he was the last one still running. Doing mindless things like running gave Harry the chance to clear his mind in a real life situation with his heart racing, it was exercise number nineteen on the list he had. It wasn’t

something he'd set out to learn early, but the opportunity did present itself.

Harry wanted to learn. It was safe to do so now. Harry even found he enjoyed it.

That afternoon's Dueling Club meeting was a special treat for Harry Potter. First he watched a duel between two Master's candidates. The club had arranged for the exhibition and Harry found it riveting.

He watched the way the man and woman moved around the platform. They never stood still. He watched how one relied upon shields a lot, some of which Harry could recognize, and the other preferred dodging. His teacher last year had them practicing the skills, but this was the first time Harry had really seen the ideas in practice against each other. It was mind awakening.

As Harry watched the action, he knew there was a lot of difference between what he'd learned in an academic way and how to apply it without thought or hesitation as these duelers did. There was an art to this beyond just practice, Harry decided. He wanted to be this good. He wanted to get started today.

The duel lasted twenty minutes. Harry recognized maybe twenty percent of the offensive spells used. It gave him a new goal to shoot for. He had the other eighty percent to learn, didn't he?

The duelers gave a brief explanation of their respective styles and answered a few questions. Then the Dueling Club's main event started: the Battle Royale. The Club always did one per term, even the usually lackadaisical or harried master candidate members showed up for that. The bigger the groups the more exciting it was.

This was obviously the first one Harry would participate in.

Harry was assigned to the Leprechaun team. He stood with his eleven other team mates and was ignored while they discussed strategy. Harry tried to listen, but realized no one wanted to hear his suggestions. He had no idea what he was doing, of course, but decided he wouldn't be a drain on the team.

A fifth year student named Colin Matthews was named the King of the team, hence the name Battle Royale, as the older team members wanted to focus on more offensive tasks. His team remained alive so long as Colin was 'alive' in the game's terms. If the other team picked Colin off, they won.

No one gave Harry any orders or suggestions. They simply assumed he'd quickly get picked off. That made Harry a bit more than angry. He decided to take the straight forward approach.

"Any suggestions?"

"Die fast, kid. Die away from the rest of us, too, so we don't trip on you." That was Colin.

Harry pursed his lips. He wasn't going to do either of those things. No way.

The Battle organizers transfigured an equal number of items on each half of the battle area: stones to hide behind, tons of litter to banish at opponents, pieces of wood and books and other items to transfigure into shield items or other weapons.

The battle began and Harry Potter promptly disappeared. He'd been practicing his disillusionment charm for a while now and was quite good with it. He snuck to the very edge of the battle area and cast two spells in a soft voice. One tripped an attacker; the other caused someone to drop his wand. The other Leprechauns took advantage of this and quickly subdued both of them.

Harry snuck to another part of the battle area and cast two more spells, then immediately rushed away. Then another two and a retreat. And another two. He wasn't stunning anyone, just giving his team some help so they could stun them. Harry stopped and prepared to launch two more spells before he himself fell over stunned.

He hadn't seen the spell approach. He reviewed his memory after calming down. No, the flair of magic has come from his back. He'd

been attacked by someone on his own team. That bit of information boiled Harry's mind. It made him angry.

His uncontrolled magic broke the stunner's effect. He got to his feet and walked to the edge of the battle area before he cancelled his disillusionment. He walked over and explained to the club leaders why he was withdrawing. He made his anger with Colin Matthews very clear.

"I don't know who stunned me or if they did it on purpose, but I was well away from the path anyone was firing on. Someone would have had to turn to fire at me. I snuck around under disillusionment and sent tripping hexes and hand-biting jinxes. Someone on my own team sent the stunner toward me and I was just helping them. It wasn't accidental friendly fire, no way, because there was no one near me at all, not in my direction. I won't stand this sort of crap, bullies like this Colin Matthews. He and the others made it clear they didn't want me on their team, so I'm done with them."

Harry walked out of the room. The meeting had started so well, too. He sat down at the desk in his room and wrote down the shields from the duel and how they'd been used. Then he scratched out a list of the offensive spells he'd seen. He meditated and went back into his memory of the duel. He tried to remember the words for the other spells – or at least what they looked like, the color, the shape, the effect.

When he woke out of the trance, he wrote down that information, too. He'd have something to keep his few free hours occupied now. It was better to study than to complain to Victor for hours on end.

The poor boy would only get upset on Harry's behalf. Beyond complaining to the club leaders, there was nothing Harry felt he could do. There was only the future, only getting better.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Come in, Mr. Potter, come in."

"Good afternoon, Headmaster."

“And Happy Winter Holiday to you, young master wizard.”

Harry took a seat in the small sitting area the Headmaster had in his office.

“How was your term?”

“I enjoyed most of it, sir.”

Orion Murphy-Black nodded. “I had reports from all of your tutors. Your Charms teacher reports you’ve been working ahead...”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, the class got a bit dull.”

“Many second years feel that. Still, the material will be covered on your exams near the end of your third year. So long as you learn it, no one will have any problem with you working ahead, I’d say. Next term focuses on medical charms, for the most part, plus some cosmetic and disguising charms. Perhaps that will be more to your liking.” The Headmaster looked down at some notes he had prepared. “It seems you’ve impressed your tutor in Transfiguration, as well.”

“Yes, sir. The training I began for my metamorphing has been somewhat helpful with transfiguration generally.”

“Interesting. I didn’t know that, but then again you are the first metamorphmagus I’ve known personally. How is your work progressing with that skill?”

“Very well, sir.” And then Harry proceeded to change his hair so that it was identical in color, shape, and length to Orion’s.

“I’d say, Mr. Potter. Quite impressive, very showy.”

“I’d appreciate it, sir, if you’d keep knowledge of this ability to yourself. The tutor who trained me has made an oath of secrecy...” He reverted his hair style.

Orion nodded. “I understand.”

“Defense has also become a favorite of mine. The dueling club was particularly inspirational. I’ve been working with my godfather lately on learning more shielding options and also better offensive spells. I find I finally have enough magical power to use the Sleeping Charm and the Blinding Curse...”

Here the Headmaster almost flinched.

“Not the Dark version. The one I found can be stopped with the ending spell. But in the anger and fear caused by being blinded, not many would think of that. It might be fairly effective.”

“I see, Mr. Potter. Interesting perspective. Do be careful using a spell like that. Permanently blinding someone in a duel is a prosecutable offense, of course.”

Harry just nodded. Sirius had already gone over and over all the safety precautions he needed to utilize.

“I understand that something happened to turn you off of the Dueling Club. Would you care to share the circumstances with me?”

Harry paused and thought about it. It seemed the Headmaster already knew something about the situation. He decided to tell the story and leave out any names.

“I see, Mr. Potter. And why did being stunned in the back make you so angry?”

“I’ve dealt with bullies and thugs my whole life, sir. I’m no longer a push over. I won’t return to my relatives because they’re bullies. I won’t stand for it here, no matter if it’s embarrassing, sir. Bigger kids picking on – or belittling – littler kids fits my definition of bullying...”

Orion held up his hand. “I’ve heard this speech before, Mr. Potter. I do understand. I just wanted to hear some of your thoughts on the subject...”

“Of course, sir.” Harry was feeling a touch sheepish for mounting his soap box in such a strident manner.

“The Scoil doesn’t tolerate bullying of any sort. From what I heard, the Club leaders mentioned to your teammates that they had been awfully stupid stunning someone who had been effectively distracting the opposition. I believe the team you were on was winning until you were stunned, Mr. Potter. Then they lost rather quickly after that.”

Harry felt a small measure of dark glee.

“Perhaps you’ll consider returning next semester. They do impart good skills.” When Harry seemed unwilling to comment either way, the Headmaster filled in the silence. “Moving on, Mr. Potter. Do you have any other thoughts on your classes? Any you regret taking, perhaps?”

“No, sir. Chemistry is quite interesting as is Algebra. I’ve started on Runes, too, so that I can eventually study more on Warding. Sirius has taught me a bit about that, of course, but I know he’s holding back on me.”

Orion smiled.

“That would be his method, wouldn’t it?”

Harry thought they were wrapping up when Orion Murphy-Black reached into a desk drawer and brought out a thin file folder.

“I did have a bit more to share with you, Mr. Potter. Much of the business over the Chamber of Secrets reopening at Hogwarts has been hushed up. For example...”

He pulled out a slim newspaper clipping and handed it to Harry.

“Professor, Malfoy Heir Petrified at Hogwarts,” went the headline. The body of the story didn’t say much more. It mainly reiterated that no one knew anything. It used a lot of words to repeat the same maddening notion.

“The clipping left out a good deal, of course. Snape was identified by name, of course, but it wasn’t noted how little he was wearing – or that the Malfoy Heir was basically unclothed at the time – or that they were attacked inside a men’s room in the dungeons. Apparently Snape had wards preventing him bringing students into his office or private quarters...”

Harry felt a bit sick at the revelation. He hadn’t taken to Malfoy, but he felt anger and pity for anyone abused that way. Thankfully his Uncle Vernon had no sex drive, otherwise Harry could imagine his uncle might have resorted to more than raising his voice or a fist from time to time.

But the idea of the wards on Snape. Did that mean it was known to the school what he liked to do to the students? Harry scrunched up his face in disgust.

“That’s horrible, sir.”

“It’s not the worst part, young Harry. There are truly strange happenings in Britain these days.” He handed over another clipping.

“Malfoy Wife, Auror Slain by Lucius Malfoy After She Makes ‘Chamber’ Accusations; Former Minister Fudge Heavily Wounded.”

The article had a bit more detail, but it seemed hazy on the details.

“From the story I received, Narcissa was furious that her son was petrified from the plot Lucius hatched...”

“Hold on, Lucius Malfoy got his own son petrified?”

“Yes, and the boy’s godfather.”

“Snape is Draco’s godfather? And they were almost naked in a bathroom together? Gross.”

“I agree. She had Lucius arrested while Fudge was attempting to intervene on Lucius’ behalf. Malfoy struck his wife down, killed an

auror, and injured Fudge severely before two other Aurors killed Malfoy...”

“That’s horrible. Draco’s an abused orphan, petrified, and he doesn’t even know yet?”

Orion nodded. “Draco’s case aside, I don’t know what kind of a school would have a monster in it – and I’m not talking about Snape either. The British just bung everything up, I swear...”

Harry smiled at Orion’s colorful language.

“Draco’s been made a ward of the Ministry. Some woman named Dolores Umbridge has been assigned as his guardian. I know you’d rather not think about Hogwarts, but I believe that ignorance isn’t bliss, particularly given who you are, Harry.”

Harry nodded.

“Did they solve the problem? Do they know what’s petrifying people?”

“They don’t have a clue.”

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Dumbledore was having a rough week. He’d managed to pass through the wards into Ireland – and to penetrate the Irish Ministry building. He needed to find instructions for getting to the Scoil ar Draiocht Glas. That was the only place Dumbledore knew Harry Potter would be. He already had a full copy of the school’s schedule. But the boy could do anything on his breaks, couldn’t he?

His attempt on the Irish Ministry hadn’t gone well. Dumbledore hadn’t counted on multiple sets of redundant wards. The British certainly didn’t use such complex mechanisms in their Ministry building.

He’d been knocked unconscious before he made it to the Ministry’s Department of Education. And now he was in this blasted holding cell, complete with magic inhibitors and every kind of anti-transport ward possible.

Dumbledore was a powerful wizard, but his wandless abilities consisted mostly of parlor tricks. He'd never had the patience to really develop the skills. With the wand he possessed, and its incredible power, why would he bother?

It was one day after he'd been captured when one of his guards had handed him a copy of a perfectly vile book. *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* by A.N. Onymous. He read the teaser copy and cringed. "A collection of nonfiction accounts of Dumbledore's actions toward Cornelius Fudge, Harry Potter, Millicent Bagnold, Sirius Black, James and Lily Potter, Bathilda Bagshot, Aberforth Dumbledore, Reginald Oswald, Mipsy the House Elf, Rubeus Hagrid...and you. After reading the book, feel free to use the magical parchment at the end to contribute your story – or that of a friend or relative – to this magically self-updating volume." Albus flipped through the blasted thing and saw there were three hundred seventeen chapters. And a magical counter indicated there were 3,148 copies in print. No, 3,155. They kept printing more. Whatever fragment of truth resided between these covers wouldn't be pretty.

Albus looked at the book, just staring away, for hours before he finally cracked it open and began to read. And then he couldn't put it down.

The chapter on Harry was all true, but it wasn't even a quarter of Dumbledore's complete actions toward the boy. The part on Fudge was mostly made up, it seemed, but it got a few things right. An entertaining piece of fiction. The stuff on Sirius Black was true and brutally written. The person who'd written that account hadn't missed much, had he?

Albus found himself enjoying the strange little book. So much of it was false, but there were enough nuggets of truth in it to make Albus remember the better days, the fun days. The accounts of so many wonderful things he'd done – well, from the writer's points of view they were awful, even criminal – Albus loved to re-read his successes.

Still, the stories didn't paint him in a very good light. They were out for public consumption, public ridicule. People were so ungrateful. One

couldn't defeat the Dark without sacrificing some puffskeins and weak-kneed morons, Dumbledore liked to say.

3,163 copies.

Didn't they know he was Albus Dumbledore? Didn't they know he was carrying out his plans for the greater good?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry walked from his Chemistry tutorial with a smile on his face. He was really beginning to understand and like this particular science. Unlike Potions, it made sense to Harry. It followed rules. Potions was all so nebulous: stir this counterclockwise, stir that potion clockwise; crush the scarab eyes for this one, juice the lizard lips for that one, debone and thinly slice the newt tails for this potion.

Bah! He'd figure out Potions one of these days. There had to be a method to the madness. It couldn't just be memorizing stupid formulas without any rhyme or reason.

Following the Headmaster's implied advice from last term, Harry had decided to give the Dueling Club another shot. He walked there for the Wednesday afternoon meeting. There were round robin duels scheduled for today. Harry was planning to observe...at least he hadn't signed up at last week's meeting to participate. He wasn't giving the vicious upper years another shot at stunning him when his back was turned.

Harry walked through the door and one of the club leaders looked excited. "Potter's just signed up for the second pool..."

"What?"

"We had two people come down with wizard pox. They're in the infirmary, you're in the round robin. No tourists here!"

Harry grumbled and pulled out his wand. It was, apparently, time to see if these people had an honorable bone in their bodies.

The first duel was a lot of fun. Harry was up against a third year who was preparing for his O-levels. The pair spent seven minutes trading increasingly bizarre spells, almost a perfect study list for the Defense examination. Harry finally won when he used one of his standard 'bizarre' tactics to end the duel. He shot a chimney floo cleaning spell – which created a strong, sudden gust of wind – at his opponent's chest. The disarming spell caught his opponent as he was recovering from the impact.

"Excellent little duel, Breckin."

"I concur, Potter. You've done some reading ahead, I'd imagine."

"Some," Harry said. He was never boastful.

Myer Breckin smiled then.

Harry's second duel was less pleasant. He was up against the fifth year Colin Matthews, the same kid who had likely stunned Harry in the back during the Battle Royale the previous term.

The rather unpleasant young man didn't bother bowing to Harry before the duel began. It was a clear breach of dueling etiquette, but the idiots who ran the Club didn't notice or care.

Harry decided to see what he could do against a fifth year. He wasn't going to have a fun duel this time.

Harry shielded, stepped away from Colin's first spell, and then sent a bludgeoner toward Colin. He sidestepped another spell while still shielded before he cast two banishers back to back. He ducked so the spell aimed at his head flew past him. Then, while still crouched near the floor, he cast a leg-locker, a stunner, and a banisher. The leg-locker absorbed into Colin's shield, while the stunner and banisher both hit him. Colin flew off the end of the dueling platform. Harry stood up then. He'd used nothing advanced compared to what a second or third year should know. He'd put only moderate amounts of power into his spells. And he'd done most of his best work dodging Colin's efforts.

It was a quick, ruthless ending.

Harry had shown his cards. His next opponents didn't treat Harry like a second year. He lost his third duel narrowly. His fourth duel was a draw as both were stunned at the same time. He did win his fifth duel against a fourth year student. He felt good that his first experience with a round robin was 3 wins, 1 draw, and 1 loss.

But he noticed that Colin Matthews' dismissive stare at Harry had turned into hatred a la Dudley Dursley. Colin was a bully, so Harry decided to keep an eye on him.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Dumbledore had been the 'guest' of the Irish Ministry for nine weeks now. He had observed their security procedures thoroughly. He had also noticed they had begun to think of him as an old man instead of as Dumbledore-the-Conqueror-of-Grindelwald. It was a mistake he would exploit today.

Dumbledore had spent his weeks of confinement determining what had gone wrong in his quest to capture Harry Potter. His conclusion: he'd attacked a strong target without adequate knowledge.

His solution: Harry Potter had to be taken while away from the Scoil so that Dumbledore didn't have to bother learning its location and entrance procedure. It also had to happen in a climate of general fear so that people wouldn't be immediately looking for Harry. No, they'd be patching together whatever site or location had just been attacked.

He nodded. He had such a plan laid out in his mind. He could 'do' general fear very well.

The security staff opened his door to bring him his tray of food a few minutes earlier than normal. Albus only glanced up from the old Quidditch magazine he'd been given to read.

He ate his meal at a moderate pace once the guard left. Then he waited.

Another guard came into the room thirty minutes after Albus received his tray. He reached out to pick up the tray when Albus attacked. He was without a wand, but one of the parlor tricks he had learned wandlessly was the Legilimens curse, as he'd used it on students thousands of times over the years to keep tabs on things. Albus tore through the guard's mind, destroying memories as he went, and then implanting a few. It had taken a good long while to compose all this so it would be ready for this attack. It was a very difficult mental activity to compose vivid, detailed memories that would stand up to another's scrutiny

"Mr. Dumbledore," the programmed guard said, "if you'd stand up, I need to escort you to a different cell. I received a report that this room is to be scanned for contraband."

He slowly stood up. "Alright."

Albus Dumbledore let his wizard stooge lead him to freedom. The wizard even returned Dumbledore's wand to him.

Albus walked out of the Ministry prison with his guard escort. No one questioned what looked like a prisoner transfer.

Dumbledore stepped outside, walked past the wards, and apparated away.

His first act of chaos? He made his way carefully to St. Mungo's. He'd heard from the guards in Ireland that the former British Minister of Magic had been attacked and was still in the hospital. Dumbledore disillusioned himself and went in the rear entrance, the one for prominent members of society.

He stalked invisibly through the hospital wards until he found the one with two rather dull looking Aurors guarding the door. He cast sleeping charms on both of them. Dumbledore stalked inside and saw what remained of the former British Minister of Magic.

He looked more savage than Alastor Moody on a bad day. At least one eye was gone. He was also missing an arm and possibly a

number of internal organs. Whatever spell Lucius Malfoy had cast that day was quite horrifying, especially if the Dark Magic couldn't be dispelled and the wounds healed.

It was only Healing magic that was keeping Fudge alive at this point, some combination of spells and potions. Albus drew his wand and cast three silent Reductor Curses at the disgusting mess in the bed.

Let the British begin to puzzle this one out.

Dumbledore's reign of terror had begun.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter saw a copy of the Dublin Magical Times at breakfast. There were two profile deaths on the front page, both from the wretched British Isles.

"Cornelius Fudge Murdered at St. Mungo's."

"Dolores Umbridge Dead at Age 82."

"Malfoy Heir, Age 12, Emancipated by Wizengamot."

Harry frowned a bit. This all smelled fishy to an extreme. He read into the articles on the two murders.

In one a 'person or persons unknown' snuck into a security laden hospital, past two Aurors, and into the former Minister's room where he was 'recovering.' Harry knew enough medical magic by now to say that one was either healed by the magic within hours or days, or one was so debilitated by one's injuries that one would likely never recover. With magical maladies, there was little middle ground.

In the other story, the old woman was found 'covered in graffiti all over her skin' with her hand showing 'equivalent slogans.' Two blood quills were found next to the body. One unnamed source reported that the old Mercator family was known for inventing and 'popularizing' blood quills; the same source mentioned that Dolores Umbridge was related into the family on a minor branch. The vicious

article writer, a Rita Skeeter, speculated that Umbridge had gone loopy, like so many other government officials, and had in effect killed herself while exploring a nasty hobby.

The third article reiterated that Draco Malfoy was still petrified at Hogwarts and was the last of his family line. The article did not explain why the Wizengamot did not assign the boy another guardian or two.

Harry found he didn't really care for the hazy way that these reprinted articles (from the Daily Prophet) explained their subject matter. Had Harry himself turned any of these as an essay due for a tutorial, he'd get, at best, an 'A,' but more likely a 'moderate fail.' No way were they close to 'Exceeding Expectations' or 'Outstanding.'

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry enjoyed spending time with the folks of the Creatures Club more than he did with those of the Dueling Club. Harry still took in a Dueling meeting one or twice a month, but he didn't participate. Not after all the fifth year students put up such a fuss. Why were people so stupid?

The Creatures Club meeting had focused on the 'interesting monster hiding in Britain's Hogwarts.' Seemed an odd topic for a discussion, but it had turned out a few interesting ideas. The Club leaders had gotten detailed reports of everything that had happened in the, at present, four petrification attacks.

"Here are the details we have: the Chamber of Secrets is some kind of legend; it's been opened before, fifty-odd years ago, when four people were petrified and one killed; the monster was supposedly left the Founder named Slytherin; we know from reports that the late Narcissa Malfoy accused her husband of delivering a dark object to a Hogwarts student to make all this happen; all the school's roosters and chickens have been killed..."

The discussion took the group through many of the famed or legendary creatures described in the Club's books. Finally it was Harry who started the right series of question.

“Hold on, you said the Slytherin House founder left the Chamber?”

A Master’s candidate who had gathered up the details nodded.

“Slytherin was in the line of British parselmouths. There are a few dozen lines elsewhere in the world, but only his line possessed it in Britain.” Harry’s parseltongue coach in his first year at the Scoil had covered some of the history along with the evil image associated with the gift. Harry never displayed his parseltongue talents for his classmates. He had enough trouble as it was.

But Harry’s suggestion was enough to get everyone else thinking.

“It could be a dragon. They respond to parseltongue, I’ve heard.”

“But dragons kill with venom and flame and brute force trauma. The petrified folks don’t have a mark on them.”

Three different volumes on snakes and serpents got hauled out before the group decided the most likely candidate – ‘given the killing of the school’s roosters’ – was a basilisk.

Harry was half-humming a little tune as he walked back from the meeting. He had his hand on the doorknob to his room before he felt magic overwhelm him from behind. He fell into blackness.

When he managed to wake, his hand hurt something awful. His face felt wet and was in a great deal of pain. Even breathing hurt. He took just a moment to realize what was happening. He felt a foot stomp on his knee. Merlin! He heard something tear. The pain, oh, the pain.

He was being attacked. People were pummeling him with their feet. He’d been immobilized and then attacked – but how? He remembered the spell, the unconsciousness... He’d been stunned in the back again! Harry hated this. He recognized the ‘signature’ action immediately. He hated them.

The anger and hatred welled up in his body until he screamed. The magic inside him viciously attacked anyone or anything nearby. He

heard at least two fleshy thuds nearby. He felt pain like he'd never felt it before. He felt tired, like he wanted to pass out, like he never wanted to wake up again.

Before he succumbed, he called out, "Mipsy. Sirius. Help..."

He didn't remember anything after that.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Voldemort's ethereal presence was sleeping and dreaming in his renewed Albanian exile. He'd tried for the Philosopher's Stone with two nearly retarded human hosts: Quirrell and the even more useless Gilderoy Lockhart. He had failed both times. He had had to sit for days, waiting, trying to get Lockhart to find the stone in that last room, but the fool only wanted to look at his own reflection in the mirror. It was only after he realized that Lockhart had lost all touch with reality that Voldemort had abandoned his retarded host.

Voldemort had given up on the Philosopher's Stone. It never danced in his dreams. No, now he dreamed of a new body. He had come across a reference in that Lockhart man's mind about a dark ritual he'd once stolen from a wizard's mind. The tale hadn't made it into Lockhart's books, but it could have been true. The major lies in Lockhart's books had to do with his self-reported level of intelligence along with the identities of those who actually performed the feats he described.

The feats themselves, by Lockhart's own mental admission, were mostly true. A very few had been exaggerated to make for a better reading experience.

But the ritual seemed genuine. It seemed incredible. Voldemort had never come across such a thing in all his many years of Dark Arts exploration. No book had ever mentioned the ritual, not even an allusion.

The ritual Lockhart stole from an African wizard named Mugoda was designed to create a body, but not a human body. A powerful body, a magical body. Voldemort dreamed of a ritual with dragon blood and

bone, of him fashioning a body stronger than a mortal human's. A body fit for an immortal wizard. A body so fearsome in appearance that one would pass out in fear from simply looking at it.

When Voldemort awoke from his slumber, wrapped inside a new snake host, he decided it was time to find a new wizard host who could help make him his new body. He'd need to be close to dragons. There were wild clutches in Britain, in Peru, and all over Eastern Europe. That would get him access to dragons. But he needed a powerful host, as well. Then he remembered about the tended reserves, the closest was in Romania.

Voldemort abandoned his snake host, listening to it die as he left. He set out for Romania, for the body he needed, for the life he was going to put back into circulation.

He was looking for a host, a powerful wizard unafraid of dragons or killing them.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

By odd coincidence, Albus Dumbledore found himself in Azkaban Prison. In fact, he was there on what would rapidly become its most famous day in existence. One might be forgiven for thinking he was there as a prisoner, but that was not in his plans. He hadn't enjoyed his stay at the Irish Ministry's much nicer facility so he would never choose to remain in such a dung pile as what the British used.

In point of fact, Albus Dumbledore was in Azkaban freeing perhaps its most notorious prisoner, the only woman to have received a life sentence for the last ninety years, Bellatrix Lestrange.

The dirty, emaciated, disheveled woman looked up at her hooded visitor after Dumbledore walked into her cell. He didn't look like a guard or bellow like one, either. He didn't feel cold like a Dementor, but he did have a rather vile, evil aura, didn't he?

"Master?"

“No, child, I am not Voldemort. But I will free you from this place to do my bidding. For three years you will do as I command and then you will be free to seek out your former master. Do you agree?”

“Do I have a choice? Rot here, useless, or get strong again outside so I can find Lord Voldemort. I choose freedom...”

The magic engulfed her as her ironic words completed her bonding. She was now a virtual slave for three years.

“We have chaos to unleash, my minion. Follow behind me and make no noise. I know the secrets of this place, but can’t protect you if you’re willfully stupid...”

Albus Dumbledore lead his ‘follower’ out of the evil-feeling prison. As he stepped outside he clutched Bellatrix’s arm and disappeared with her. His plans for luring Harry Potter to him required simultaneous operations throughout Britain and Ireland. They required massive amounts of fear.

Dumbledore always knew what he was doing. He knew the Ministry would never willingly report that Bellatrix Lestrange was missing from Azkaban. It would make them look bad.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

In the chaos after his attack, Harry forgot all about the letter he had planned to write to Hogwarts about the probable basilisk inside the school. At first, the only thing he could consider was that he wanted to leave the Scoil.

He’d been beaten again. He kept seeing his Uncle everywhere he turned. He kept seeing Dudley and his fat friends huffing after him. All his miserable childhood kept reappearing in front of him wherever he looked. Harry knew it was impossible that those Muggles were actually here. He was inside a magical school located in an old leprechaun cavern, which was about as far as one could get from Little Whinging, Surrey. But it didn’t stop the things Harry saw and remembered.

It took him longer to overcome his desire to flee than it took his wounds to heal in the Infirmary. It was only Sirius who managed to get his godson to settle down.

In the days that followed Sirius' intervention, Harry's fear began to manifest as anger and a desire for vengeance. Harry started and threw away a half dozen letters to the School's Headmaster asking for his attackers to be expelled. He wanted their wands snapped. He wanted them to live as Muggles in dirty alleyways begging for food. He couldn't concentrate on anything other than seeing them punished.

His attention in tutorials began to wane. He just didn't care about his classes. He stopped going to most of his assigned lectures. He avoided his godfather. He avoided most everyone. He was snappish, cold, and rude.

This time it was his friend Victor who helped to begin setting Harry aright. Victor did have to magically bind Harry to a chair to make him sit still for the conversation, though.

"You need to stop thinking about them, Harry. You're the one who needs help right now. You look terrible; you look so angry you could burn paper with your eyes. You're not a basilisk, Harry, you're a wizard and my friend..."

"It won't stop, Vic. I can't stop thinking about that night. What if I'd been more observant? What if I'd been carrying my wand out? What if I..."

"Harry, they cursed you in the back. They're cowards and bullies. You didn't do this. They're screwed up in the head, not you. Don't let them ruin you. I heard one of the teachers mention that Matthews' father was set free by the British after the Voldemort wars. He claimed the 'Imperius defense,' Harry. Matthews' basically a Death Eater..."

Harry's jaw unclenched.

"Really? Why didn't..." He wondered why the Headmaster hadn't told him at their last meeting. The man certainly knew the story. He

decided to ask straight out instead of stewing. This anger wasn't making him stronger, was it?

"What'd they end up doing with them? I never asked."

"I don't know, Harry. No one's seen them since you all went into the Infirmary..."

"Did the Headmaster tell everyone I'd been attacked?"

Victor hesitated, but then nodded. "Did people believe him?"

"Yeah. A lot of people knew Matthews was a bully. No one knew exactly why until now, I guess."

"I don't like this, Vic. I don't like not feeling safe. I don't like not being in control..."

Harry eventually got right in the head again. It took some time. It took talking to a lot of people, too. Harry ended up spending hours with Sirius, just talking. He also threw himself into his studies and his physical education class. He'd been weak after sitting in the Infirmary for eight days, most of them designed to help heal Harry's mind, not his body.

He learned detection spells of all sorts. Even ones that could reveal someone hiding under an invisibility spell or cloak. He redoubled his meditative exercises. He was going to learn controlled wandless magic by the time he left the Scoil. (It wasn't enough that his anger had twice given him uncontrolled and emotional wandless magic; he needed control.) It was not a goal; it was a commitment.

Harry Potter would never be beaten again. He might lose a duel or a training exercise, but he would never be a victim. He was learning now, learning all the time. He was a machine. He still laughed, went flying, and enjoyed his life – but he had a purpose now.

He had grown up knowing only to run from bullies or to bow to their will. He'd run from Dudley's gang and almost consented to his aunt

and uncle's abuses. Then he'd run away to Hogwarts to escape all that. And run to the Scoil to escape the liars and bullies at Hogwarts.

But there was another options, wasn't there? There was another way to handle bullies, another purpose Harry could apply himself to.

Wouldn't that be nice? Harry could be more than just a famous orphan, one whose fame derived for not dying when his parents had. Harry knew what he was about now. He would never fall to bullies again. Not ever.

Harry would fight them. Head on. Every time he discovered them.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Peter Pettigrew found life rather enjoyable as a pet rat. He got plenty of food and water; lots of rest. Since he was so old and decrepit, like everything else Weasley, no one expected him to do much or accomplish anything. His mere existence justified his food, water, and lodging. He only found himself experimented on by the Twin Terrors a few times per year. Lately, they'd grown completely out of their fascination with giving him scales or turning him fuschia. Life as a Weasley rat was good.

It was better than the Cruciatus Curse any day. Or being discovered by the Ministry and sent to Azkaban. Or found by Sirius Black, who'd already served ten years in prison for Pettigrew's murder. Could they send Sirius back to prison if he did wind up killing Pettigrew? Peter never wanted to find out.

He was an uncurious sort of person. It was one of his major flaws.

The other was that Peter had never really understood pain. He didn't know how to deal with it or avoid it or suffer through it. He really knew nothing about it at all.

His grand plan for avoiding the pain of war after Hogwarts had been to join the Dark Lord. Only after he did that did Peter learn the effects of the Cruciatus Curse first hand.

That hadn't worked very well for avoiding pain, had it?

Peter became extremely familiar with the Pain Curse before the Dark Lord fell. And then he spent the rest of his time as a rat. He hadn't actually transformed into his human form in a few years now. He felt very comfortable in his animagus form; it suited him rather well. He wondered idly if he would have a problem changing back when the time came.

Peter looked around when he felt himself being jostled. Damn, he'd fallen asleep inside Ron's tatty old cloak and the boy was fastening it to himself. It was the dead of night and the boy wanted to go exploring when there was a monster on the loose. Couldn't Weasleys breed brains into their children? They seemed to go for quantity over quality. A bit annoying really.

Peter tried to go back to sleep but found all the jostling annoying. Suddenly Ron stopped in his tracks, there was a horrifying hissing/screeching noise, and Ron went stock still. Then his body plummeted to the floor, almost crushing Peter. He scurried out of Ron's cloak and found Ron stiff as a board.

Oh, no. His 'owner' had been attacked like that teacher and the Malfoy boy and the other few. Peter needed to get out of here, but he moved so damned slowly as a fat rat. He tried to reverse transfiguration to return him to his human form. It took three tries before Peter became Peter again. He began running. He turned around a corner just as he saw a pair of giant yellow eyes.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Ah, Mr. Potter, I see you are a bit upset. Sit down, let's talk, shall we?"

Harry took a seat, the one farthest away from his Headmaster. Harry had surrendered much of his anger over what had happened to him – but not all of it. He could, of course, carry a grudge.

"I believe we might have some business to clear away before we discuss academics?"

"If you wouldn't mind."

Orion Murphy-Black just nodded.

"Unlike other Headmasters of the Scoil who might have claimed it, Harry, I am not omniscient. I do not always see a problem for what it is before it pops up. In this case, I saw Colin Matthews as a bully, as someone with a lot of talk. I did not see him attacking, with two other accomplices, another younger student for any reason, let alone a stupid one..."

"Sir, you knew about his father's history...about him being a Death Eater who went unpunished...and you did not tell me."

The Headmaster looked solemn when he nodded. "I did not tell you, that is correct."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"For the weak sounding reason that I did not want you to think worse of Colin – for something he did not do – than you already did. In theory, Colin was not his father. However, he has reproduced some of his father's more repulsive actions. At the Scoil, we do not let evil acts go unpunished. He and the others have been confined to rooms. As soon as the school unseals itself for break tomorrow, all three of them are expelled from the grounds. They may finish their educations elsewhere. Any records the Scoil sends out will contain remarks on their unprovoked attack on a fellow, younger student..."

"Four weeks ago, that would not have been enough. I would have wanted to challenge them to a blood duel or wanted to hire a mercenary to torture them for a good long while..."

The Headmaster leaned forward in his chair. "And now you do not?"

"I don't want that kind of personal vengeance any more. I have better things to study than revenge. But shouldn't they be charged with a crime? Their loss of an education here is not enough to help soothe the nightmares or my still shaking hand..."

"I was not aware you were still suffering from nightmares, Harry, or any physical debility."

"I didn't see you coming around to ask..."

Orion nodded and then looked a bit crestfallen. "I did visit you in the Infirmary twice, Mr. Potter. I asked our Healer for your condition several times. As for your hand, I was assured it would be fine with time..."

"Mr. Murphy-Black, you need to choose. Either you can be the headmaster for everyone here or you can try to serve as a counselor or a friend to the people here. Don't think you can have it both ways, friendly when you wish and stern ignorer of inconvenient truths the rest of the time..."

"I don't see the distinction, Mr. Potter."

"You can be the aloof, ignorant Headmaster or you can be the concerned, well-informed Mr. Murphy-Black. I like the Scoil. I like what I'm learning here. I know you regard me as a curiosity, as an achievement of sorts, but I no longer plan to leave because of what happened to me or the lack of real punishment for these three. I have already written letters to the Irish government, sir. If they do not bring charges, then I will keep on pushing. I will send out public letters. I will see these three punished specifically so they may not do this to anyone ever again. Colin Matthews has attacked students here before – I talked to the victims – he's been punished and even suspended (in school) before, but more times than not his friends have aided him in covering it all up. I'm not shocked he thought he could get away with hurting me, sir, but I won't stand for bullies any longer, in any form..."

"Some of what you say is true. It seems we tried so hard to see past Mr. Matthews' father's influence that we erred on his side a time or two..."

"You allowed a bully free reign in your school for years. That's inexcusable. It's equivalent to condoning the bullying, sir."

“The Scoil does not condone bullying...”

“Sir, anyone can write a good policy. It takes a different sort of person to enforce a good policy even in the face of other interests. You can't just give everyone an infinite number of chances. My old Headmaster, I've read, tried to rehabilitate a Death Eater. How did that work out for him? For the students?”

The Headmaster frowned and stayed silent for a few moments. This was not the Harry Potter he expected to meet in this end-of-term meeting. Something was different about the boy. He was angry, but he seemed more thoughtful about the larger world. He was growing up too fast, but it couldn't be helped any more, could it?

“I see the point. But Mr. Matthews was not a Death Eater. It was his choice to become evil and he did that very recently. I do not possess the Sight. I am sorry you were his victim, Harry...”

“I was his fifth victim. There could be more, I suppose. Five different accounts of bullying and at least threatened violence – that's a pattern, sir. He's not some misguided youth. He's a budding criminal.”

“I hope you get your wish, then, Mr. Potter. I will neither attempt to support or quash your attempt at receiving justice. I stand by what the Scoil has done. I am sad for the pain you received...”

“Sir, you misunderstand. This is not about my pain. This is about four others who received no real relief from a bully before he attacked me more harshly, with enough violence to finally ‘merit’ expulsion. Bullies who aren't stopped early get stronger, more violent, more hateful. Stop them early or you have lost... This conversation is my attempt to get you to act earlier, with teeth, against others who use violence in any form as an answer to a problem...”

“Phrased like that, Harry, I think I can see what your concern is. I will discuss it with the other senior teachers. May I invite you to tea after the holiday to discuss this again?”

“I would appreciate it, sir.”

“Fine. And how did the term go in an academic sense. Most of your reports remained excellent, of course, save the week or three following this unfortunate attack on you.”

The conversation lasted for twenty minutes before Orion turned the meeting to a few other matters.

“We did have an application from a twelve year old to join the Scoil...”

“Sir?”

“Given your vehemence about knowing fellow students’ backgrounds, I thought I should mention that Draco Malfoy has been unpetrified and has withdrawn from Hogwarts. He’s applied here and to a few other schools...”

“Thank you for the warning. Other than a handful of meetings at which he acted unpleasant to me, I have nothing to say about him. If he shows himself a bully here, I’d expect you to take action.”

The Headmaster smiled the slightest bit.

“As a curiosity, I thought you might wish to know Severus Snape, your old Potions teacher, has been sent to Azkaban very quietly after a secret trial. No one wanted to admit publicly what the man has been doing to students for years...”

Harry nodded in disgust. Snape was a classic example of a bully given free reign. Even worse, he took advantage of his freedom in unconscionable ways.

“There was another development. This one was so highly embarrassing to the British government it was censored from the papers, I believe. Peter Pettigrew was found, dead, at Hogwarts near where another student had been petrified.”

“Does Sirius know?”

“I will tell him at lunch, Harry...”

“My parents’ betrayer finally dead. Why hush that up?”

“Because few believed he was still alive, especially the former Minister, Cornelius Fudge. They freed Sirius because of his veritaserum evidence in a public trial they hadn’t expected to give him, but they never looked for Pettigrew. I’m not even sure they rescinded his Order of Merlin, either.”

“See what I mean, sir? Bullies don’t just live in schools...”

Orion did nod.

“Finally, Harry, one of the senior teachers who generally works with master’s candidates, Enrico Bastata, has asked me to invite you to participate in a special project at the start of your third year, as he’ll be off next term conducting research. That’s a year earlier than special projects are typically undertaken, of course. But his interest is in soul magic and he thinks there’s something unusual about your curse scar.”

“If a teacher wants to explore my scar, I’m all for getting rid of it, sir.”

“I’ll pass along your words, Mr. Potter. As for me being a Headmaster or a counselor, as you distinguish between them, I do promise to always listen to what you and the other students have to say, even if I do not agree with you or cannot act as you might wish me to...”

“And I promise to always tell you what I think, especially when I think you’re doing the wrong thing.”

“I could ask for nothing more, young master wizard.”

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Voldemort’s spirit had identified the strongest of the wizards at the dragon reserve in Romania. Twice he had been ejected from the ginger-haired man’s mind. It had been much easier to take over Quirrell, as he’d been mostly in favor of the move. Lockhart had had no mental defenses at all. But this Weasley was a thing of strength.

It just reinforced Voldemort's interest in this Charlie Weasley. The wizard was obviously strong enough to collect the fresh dragon parts Voldemort would need for his ritual.

Voldemort didn't realize that his two recent possessions had already spent most of the power he'd managed to absorb since his ejection from his true body in 1981. He would never have had enough power to possess Charlie Weasley without waiting for five or eight years first.

Voldemort made his third attempt to take possession of Charlie Weasley late on a Thursday night. The dragon handlers slept in communal bunks as the bulk of their funding went toward the dragons – and the humans came a distant second. An old cursebreaker turned dragon handler named Wilberforce Blackmarsh saw Charlie thrashing around. He recognized that something odd was happening and he began his standard set of diagnostics on Charlie.

"What the hell's possessing the lad? Kid's fighting it off, but I can be of help," he muttered to himself.

Blackmarsh went outside and levitated a massive chunk of stone. He returned and began casting spells at Weasley. One hooked a magical tether into the invading spirit. Another he used to place both Charlie and the possessing spirit into a deep sleep. A third drew out the possessing force. Blackmarsh then pointed his wand at the stone and banished the spirit into the stone. It was an old technique for dealing with ghosts, dark wraiths, and other bits of odd magic he'd encountered in Egypt and other countries.

He cast a spirit sealing curse around the stone at that point before rousing Weasley from his magical sleep.

"...what the Merlin was that?"

"Possession attempt, lad. Has it happened before?"

"I think so. Such a strange dream I get. Red eyes, a hissing sort of voice..."

“Doesn’t sound good, lad. Let’s turn this over to some professionals. I can think of a couple in the British Ministry, in one of those departments that don’t really exist...”

Charlie tried to puzzle it out, but found he was exhausted. “Fighting that thing took a lot out of me. I’m out for the count. Can we discuss it tomorrow?”

Charlie was asleep before Blackmarsh had a chance to say ‘yes.’

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry took one look at Trenton Rand and stood up from his seat at the dinner table. “Excuse me, Sirius, I have to stop an idiot.”

“I understand,” his godfather said.

Harry walked over to where one of the remaining fifth year students sat at a table mostly filled with first years.

“Excuse me. Is Mr. Rand bothering you this evening?”

None of the intimidated students said anything, but Harry could see the fear in their eyes.

“Mr. Rand, perhaps you’d care to join me and my godfather for dinner. I’m sure these students would like to discuss their classes without feeling as if they were leaving you out of the conversation...”

“Butt out, Potter.”

“Actually, I insist. I’m sure my godfather would love to speak with you. He can share many of his memories of being in prison with Dementors – or perhaps talk about the mostly illegal curses dreamed up by the Black family of years past. He knows one curse that will liquefy a person’s... well, perhaps that isn’t fit conversation for dinner. Let’s be off, then, shall we?”

The bully clenched his teeth and left the table. But he didn't follow Harry back to where he was eating. The boy left the dining hall altogether.

"Did you threaten this one with me again, Harry?"

Harry just smiled.

"I never noticed how unfriendly the older kids could be to the younger ones... How did I miss that last year?"

"You were probably so busy adjusting to everything you didn't notice – or you chalked it up to being new and unfamiliar with the way things are."

Harry nodded and returned to his dinner.

"Things won't be that way any more so long as I have a say."

"You can be perfectly charming on moment, Harry, and utterly terrifying the next. Keep working on that. I think it's an excellent skill to have."

Harry almost choked on a piece of chicken as he began to laugh.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The halls of Hogwarts were utterly deserted. The portrait guardians and disappearing walls had been charmed to let no one out after hours.

The person who was currently stumbling along like an inferius had not returned to her dormitory before curfew. She knew many places to hide in the school. She knew many things, period.

She knew what was about to happen once she opened the secret entrance in the abandoned bathroom. She knew what would happen once she made it to the Chamber. She had been trained her entire life to know of the good that Voldemort could do for the world. If it

cost her her life, well, her father had always told her he wished he'd had a son. Perhaps her parents would try for more children?

Perhaps they would someday know that it was her sacrifice that had returned the Dark Lord to power?

Pansy Parkinson knew she was the fourth to possess this diary within Hogwarts, but the first to hold it willingly. The book had rifled through Ginny Weasley's mind only to command her, after opening the chamber the first time, to pass the book to Penelope Clearwater. From there the book went to Emma Ranforth, the Head Girl of the year. The book finally settled on Pansy to be its prime instrument.

She found herself in the chamber. She found herself fading into darkness as the handsome form of Tom Riddle came into being. She felt herself dying. It was only then she began to struggle. Only when it was far too late.

Pansy Parkinson died that night. Tom Riddle regained a sixteen-year-old body at that exact moment. And when his soul fully transferred from the diary into his new body, he exploded into silver and gold shards of magic.

The young Tom Riddle had only begun his researches into soul magic when he created his first horcrux. He didn't know the dangers of a horcrux-trapped spirit attempting to make itself a new body so long as the original soul fragment still existed on the earth.

Tom Riddle had unknowingly created a paradox. He willed his soul into a body when his original, but diminished, soul remained in the world (even trapped inside a massive piece of stone). Magic responded in the only way it knew how: it destroyed the paradox, it made the offending, duplicate soul cease to exist.

The student Riddle wouldn't learn until he was nearing forty about the dangers of time turners and how they truly worked – for a time turner seemed to make two identical persons. The truth one that it couldn't replicate a soul; it merely permitted two bodies to exist, both tied to the same soul.

The older Voldemort was a smarter chap. His horcruxes created later in life would have known not to attempt what the young Voldemort had just done. Too bad his younger form had been so overreaching.

Pansy Parkinson needn't have died that night. She accomplished nothing profitable for her would-be master.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry laughed midway through the duel in his Dueling and Intermediate Combat course. The instructor had brought in a number of Master's candidates to duel his students. Harry had a rather foppish man who as entirely too precise in his wand movements and incantations.

Harry took delight in being especially sloppy with his words and wand waving for that duel. He did things that shouldn't have made any kind of spell at all, just to show the foppish man a few interesting things.

He had really enjoyed his third term at school. He had no problem putting bullies in their places. Victor and he had begun delving into the library for more and more dueling techniques. They'd begun an informal dueling group for people in their year and the year above them. The membership in the official Dueling Club had been down considerably after Colin Matthews' attack on Harry.

The Scoil didn't categorize magic in the same ways that the British did. There was no light and dark. The library stocked books on rotting curses – and their counters – and on every kind of ritual ever conceived. The Scoil didn't teach a course on Rituals, but that was mainly because the skill level required to perform many of them wasn't often attained by fourteen or fifteen year old students.

These oddities of magic Harry studied, but didn't feel tempted to try. It wasn't as if they were forbidden and thus more tempting. They were odd bits of magic that Harry looked at with some curiosity and disgust.

He enjoyed all his classes, some a bit more than others, but his new passion was his introduction to archaeology tutorial. A few of the Master's candidates had done stints as cursebreakers – ahem, grave

robbers – in interesting parts of the world. Harry wondered if he could convince Sirius to arrange a trip to Egypt this summer. Harry knew of a few places that might be quite a bit of fun to explore.

His 'Study of Other Magical Races' course was still interesting. He'd gotten to meet a full-blooded veela and also make friends with a hippogryph.

He saw the Headmaster three times during term. It sounded like the teachers were beginning to rethink their policies on bullying. Some were a bit hard to convince about an 'early intervention' approach to the problem, but Orion Murphy-Black promises to keep working on them.

Harry kept trying to shame the Scoil into action by confronting every act of bullying or intimidation he witnessed. He kept a little notebook. The number of incidents were down from the start of term, but they still occurred. Some people never learned...

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Dumbledore had the boring job today. He'd sent his minion, Bellatrix, to do the distracting.

She was so pliable and her mind was beyond reason. She still hadn't pieced together that Dumbledore had freed her from prison. (Perhaps she wouldn't piece it together until the moment just before Dumbledore eliminated her altogether. She'd take the blame for all the recent chaos in Britain and Ireland so Dumbledore could busy himself with his new apprentice.)

The woman couldn't think at all, but she could destroy with the best of them. He felt a bit jealous.

As she was out blowing up the magically obscured portions of Blarney Castle that only witches and wizards could see and visit, Albus was sitting behind the reception desk looking to all the world like a witch named Eliza Callahan. He was waiting for a particular letter he'd sent out this morning to have an effect.

It was nearing eleven o'clock when a young man walked up to his desk.

"I'm here to see Remus Lupin."

Perfect. The boy had come alone. Albus had heard that Sirius Black was in France. He had hoped Harry would come alone when he received the 'official' hospital letter notifying him that Remus was in care and had requested Harry to know.

Albus stared at the boy for a second.

The boy in front of Albus looked nothing like Harry Potter, no black hair, no scar, no green eyes, no glasses. But he'd said the words. Since Remus Lupin wasn't in the hospital, even after Albus' best efforts to find and harm the disgusting were-creature, the code phrase Harry had just said was as good as screaming out his name.

"Just one second, young man. Could you sign in there, please."

Harry frowned for a moment before reaching over to the guest log. Albus quickly reached over to offer Harry the quill. His right index finger strayed over Harry's hand and the potion that was magically pooled on Albus' finger leached into Harry's body rapidly. The poor boy collapsed before Albus was able to make it around the desk.

"Boy needs some air. Let me take him outside for a moment."

That was how Albus Dumbledore was able to kidnap Harry Potter without anyone knowing the first thing about it. Albus carried the boy in his arms outside the hospital wards and disappeared away.

It would be some time before anyone found the real Eliza Callahan dead in a broom closet on the fifth floor. No one would ever officially tie together her death with any sort of kidnapping, either. It seemed to all concerned a random, senseless killing.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter's Third Year

A/N: Just to remind everyone: the description of this tale says, "no pairings." That hasn't changed since I started writing the story.

Just one more chapter and then the story's done. Also, there's another cliffhanger. Hope you all enjoy it!

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Dumbledore brought his newly captured apprentice to a cave outside Durham. He'd spent a while preparing it. The thing was riddled with magical barriers and hidden walls and secret rooms.

Dumbledore laid the oddly disguised Harry Potter on the grass and searched the boy for his wand or for any portkeys. He found nothing magical on the boy at all. No wand. No magical rings or trinkets. No tracking spells on his clothing or person. No evidence at all that he was a wizard.

Albus stood up and cast magical revealing spells. Nothing showed on the boy at all.

"Are you that stupid to go out without a wand, Harry?"

As the boy was still unconscious because of the potion Albus had slipped him, there was no response. Albus wasn't sure how he liked the idea of a stupid Harry Potter, particularly as he was about to become Albus' apprentice. Albus really couldn't abide stupid people in any shape or form.

"Didn't the Irish teach you anything, Harry? Didn't they teach you caution – and guile – and vigilance? I never thought it would be this simple to bring you back under my control.

The head of steam he'd been building for years finally burst in that moment. Albus kicked out at Harry's head and only missed by a fraction of an inch.

“You stupid, spoiled little boy. Look at what you’ve cost me. Look at what I’ve become. I have a minion now because I can’t play my political games. I’m reduced to blowing things up for sport rather than playing with laws and manipulating the lives of young children. This is but a half life, Harry, and whatever you did, you’ve brought this upon me.

“Woe to you, young Potter, for you will feel the lash. You belong to me now.”

Albus watched the young man’s labored breathing. He would wake the child in a while and then force him into the apprentice binding here. This would be his last glimpse of daylight for many years – or perhaps forever. Albus would make all the decisions now. Now and forever.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Bellatrix Lestrange collapsed in a heap inside the dimly lit room she had taken in Derry City. Her attack on Blarney Castle made no sense to her. Why had her ‘master’ – the one-time eminent Light Wizard Dumbledore – ordered it?

She knew he was working off some type of plan. But what was it?

And when would his scheme conclude? That was the most important question.

Not long after she pieced together her ‘liberator’s’ identity – which hadn’t been that hard, how many wizards in the world were powerful to walk inside Azkaban and walk out again after freeing a prisoner? – she had decided he was using her only so long as he needed. He considered Bellatrix expendable.

Albus Dumbledore planned to betray and kill her. That was obvious.

Bellatrix hadn’t fallen for Dumbledore’s stupidity when she had been in school. She wasn’t about to start now.

She was regaining her strength and planning now. The bond she'd partially accepted kept her from actively plotting Dumbledore's death. But soon it would be time to take Dumbledore out of the equation. He wasn't obstructing her efforts to find her true Master – not yet, he wasn't – but he would soon become a problem. Bellatrix hoped she was at full strength by the time she needed to dispense with the fiction of serving Dumbledore.

She needed an exquisite plan. As demented as she seemed, Bellatrix had always been the planner among the Black sisters. Andromeda was too revolted by her parents and their ideals to think clearly about anything other than escaping from the Black Legacy; Narcissa had a bit of fluff in her head instead of a brain. Thinking had always fallen to Bellatrix.

She liked to throw people off by being completely bizarre, speaking in baby talk or in tongues. People who discounted her abilities usually never got a second chance to do so.

How else did a witch rise up to be in Voldemort's Inner Circle, when every other member was a wizard? She was gifted with a wand and with a vicious streak a kilometer wide. She was also sufficiently disconnected from reality not to care about killing people. A perfect combination, really.

So...what to do with Dumbledore? He had treated her as less than garbage. No one did that for long with a member of the Black Family. Toujours Pur referred not only to blood purity; it also referred to purity of planning, purity of purpose. She would have to decide something special for her old Headmaster.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry regained consciousness hours before the potion he'd absorbed should have worn off. He gave the credit to his body's ability to burn through any kind of sleeping potion quickly.

When he woke, he didn't move or change his breathing pattern. He quickly pieced together that he was in a place he didn't mean to be. He felt grass underneath him. He wasn't in the hospital where Remus

– oh no. The letter. The letter that pulled him out of the Scoil. It hadn't been real, or if it was, it was still a trap of some sort.

He fell for it.

He, Mr. Vigilant, fell for something that stupid.

He felt stupid for a few moments before the desire to fix his situation overwhelmed his interest in self-recriminations.

Harry strained to hear, to sense whatever he could. It wasn't long before he realized there was someone else nearby. This person breathed rather deeply. It wasn't a snore exactly. It was the deep, almost labored breathing of an old man or woman.

Harry lightly twitched over his whole body. He wasn't bound or restrained in any way he could feel. Whoever had taken him had relied on their potion, spell, or maybe a thunk to the back of Harry's head to get him to this place.

Not being bound made escaping easier.

He didn't know who his opponent was, but he could guess it was related to Dumbledore somehow. He knew the ancient wizard was persistent, going so far as to break into the Irish Ministry at one point and then escaping with ease from their prison.

Harry heard movement. He listened as his probable captor walked toward him.

“...yes, the boy must go back into my control...he's had two full years at the Scoil to learn to be himself...he must be only shadow and show abject humility if he's to sacrifice himself for us all...it really is the only way...who cares for the life of one, if it's the life to save all others...had I killed Grindelwald as a young man, I often wonder what might have happened...none may judge my soul, for I know I am right in this, as in all things...oh, yes, young master Potter, you have pain and retraining to endure...”

The crazy man kept muttering at barely the sound of a whisper. Harry didn't know who it was, but he feared it was Albus Dumbledore himself. The man was obsessed and magically powerful; but he also sounded insane and oblivious to the world around him.

Was there something Harry could do with all this?

"...let's start first with that ridiculous disguise he's wearing...I've been meddling in the lives of Potters for four generations now, I want to see my subject...that classic messy black hair...got the fools thinking they always need to marry red heads...Finite Incantatem."

Harry released his metamorphmagics as quickly as he could. He hoped it looked plausible to this insane Dumbledore fellow. He didn't want to reveal any of his secrets to the man, especially not a secret that might aid Harry in his escape.

"...yes, that's Harry Potter...same messy headed urchin as his father and grandfather, wealthier than a lord, too...I'll make him surrender his vaults when he swears the Apprentice's Oaths...it would be nice to be rich, wouldn't it?...oh, yes, the last of the Potters will never live to set foot inside the Potter Family vault...can't let the money to go to waste, can we?"

Harry had stopped thinking solely of escaping. He was now also trying to figure out some ways to really hurt and harm this evil man. The vile things that flowed from him. How could he ever have been in charge of young witches and wizards?

How to escape? How to punish? How to make it back to Black Estate before Sirius began to panic?

Harry began by totaling his assets. Dumbledore couldn't find his wand – no one could – nor could he get at Harry's permanent portkey to the Scoil. All students had them and were told to keep them on their persons whenever outside the Scoil. Harry had done one step better.

Metamorphmages could adjust their clothing, or conceal their wands, or do anything they wanted, if sufficiently skilled, to their appearances

– just like animages could transform and carry their clothing, wands, and other possessions with them. Magic was wonderful.

Harry had his wand and portkey concealed through his metamorphics. Dumbledore had no way to penetrate that defense.

But he needed something to startle or surprise the old man. Harry needed an advantage.

His other assets? Harry couldn't think of any, yet. But he had a bit of time before Dumbledore would try to wake him.

And if he didn't think of anything else... Then he'd need to figure out how he could use a wand and a portkey to subdue the most powerful living wizard in Britain?

Strangely enough, they'd never cover this scenario in Harry's Dueling and Intermediate Combat course.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Draco Malfoy arrived in the forest by falling to his knees and almost landing in a puddle of rainwater. He growled at the portkey he'd just taken before beginning to follow the path that led to his new school for the coming year.

The undignified thing was that Draco had to interview and then take placement tests before he could be guaranteed a spot. He was a Malfoy. They didn't need placement tests, did they?

Still, Draco was the last of his line and he wanted to go to the school Harry Potter had chosen. He'd had almost two years to think about how he'd alienated the powerful wizard from his offer of friendship. Draco had never been an introspective sort, but spending a couple months petrified gave one plenty of time to think.

Draco didn't like what he was. He didn't like what his father and mother had fashioned him to be. He was wealthy and had a great name, but he realized he was fairly useless as a wizard. He further

realized he had no friends, but only sycophants or people who feared him for his father's power and influence.

Draco was not his father, his murdering bastard of a father. Draco would blast his own father off the Malfoy family tapestry, but that couldn't be done to the dead. Stupid enchantment.

His mother had coddled him into a useless ponce, but he still loved her. And Lucius had killed her. He'd been doing one of his idiotic little plots and been caught out by Narcissa. And he'd killed her. She'd only turned on him after he, Draco, had been caught up in the disaster his father had started.

Draco loved and revered his mother, and hated her for staying with Lucius for so long. The man was so vile.

As soon as Draco knew what had happened, he'd returned to Malfoy Manor, found his father's awakened magical portrait, and burned it in front of all the house elves. He earned himself very loyal friends that day.

His father's old lawyers helped Draco to apply to other schools. His father had wanted him to go to Durmstrang, so that was out. He'd strongly considered Beauxbatons, the Franklin Academy in America, that Italian school with the crazy name, and the Irish school where Harry Potter had wound up.

When he figured out he'd need 'muggle' subjects for the Franklin School and Scoil ar Draiocht Glas, he'd gotten the lawyers to send him tutors. Draco was not a diligent student, but he wasn't going back to Hogwarts. He learned what he could and even kept his bitter inner dialogue from spilling out of his mouth. He hadn't said the word 'mudblood' since he'd woken from his petrification. He planned never to say it again, in 'honor' of his father.

Finally he'd made up his mind – until that blasted letter arrived asking for an interview and explaining that he'd be tested.

Still, Draco had come. It was a small school. He'd have his own teachers and he'd be done here sooner than if he went back to

Hogwarts or enrolled in Beauxbatons. There had to be something special about the place, after all Potter of all people had come here.

He walked into a massive cave and had to fight to keep his jaw from dropping. It was an enormous space. With the school right in the center of it all. Draco immediately felt safer standing in this cave. He almost peeled off his shoes so he could stand barefoot in the grass down here.

“Magic can do anything.” Even grow grass in a supposedly dark cavern.

A house elf greeted Draco at the door to the school and led him through the building for his interview.

Draco walked inside a large, plain office.

“Mr. Malfoy, please sit down.”

“Thank you. I didn’t catch your name.”

“I’m Orion Murphy-Black, Headmaster. We have thirty minutes or so to talk and get acquainted before your tests begin. May I start by asking if you have any questions for me?”

“Why do students study...Muggle subjects if they’re all magical?”

“Excellent question, Mr. Malfoy. The world has six billion Muggles and a few million witches and wizards. There are no completely magical villages at all in Ireland and only one in Britain. When it comes to jobs, to living, to everyday life, witches and wizards need to understand the world, all of it. Unless they plan to only ever visit wizarding areas and vacation in magical places and never step onto the streets of Dublin or London. Rather a boring life, I’d say...”

“I can pass for Muggle,” Draco said, “without knowing their history and their sciences...”

“Then, no, you couldn’t pass in the most important ways, Mr. Malfoy. If you had a conversation with a Muggle and he casually referenced

the Falklands War or the Prime Minister's recent decision on education or one of a thousand other things, your not understanding the reference would prove you a liar, a pretender, or a rube..."

Draco gritted his teeth, but held back the scathing responses he was tempted to make.

"Anyway, nonmagical subjects are required through your O-levels only. Most students continue on with at least some through their N-levels, but that choice is up to you and your advisors."

"I get assigned an advisor here?"

"No, I assume your family has advisors. I also assume you need to be groomed for taking over your family estates and such..."

Draco nodded.

"You may find yourself interested in taking a business and estate management special option after your O-levels are complete."

"I think I would."

"Excellent. Now, Mr. Malfoy, perhaps you could enlighten me as to why you wish to attend our Scoil."

"Even with the...Muggle subjects, it's the best school of magic I've found. You don't have famous teachers, that's true enough, but I'll get personal tuition. It wasn't like I got personal lessons with that old trout McGonagall anyway. I work best if I learn it myself and then ask questions after..."

Orion nodded his head several times as the young Mr. Malfoy explained his thought process. He knew a good deal about how the Scoil operated. It suggested he'd either been coached well or was actually serious about wanting to attend the Scoil.

Orion Murphy-Black decided to give the kid a shot. Fifteen weeks of tutorials would prove whether the Scoil was for him. If he could cut it,

fine. If not, the boy could go back to Britain and engage tutors to fill his head full of magic and only magic.

“That’s fine, Mr. Malfoy. It sounds as though you’ve given this some thought. Why don’t I escort you to the tutors who will be assessing you this morning?”

Draco bit back on the scowl that wanted to form on his face.

“That would be fine.”

By the time he left the Scoil grounds that afternoon, Draco had never felt as thoroughly wrung through in his life.

He’d been almost perfectly humiliated by the barrage of questions on history – “what do you know about the rise of the Roman Empire” or “on the topic of social history, discuss the rise of women’s rights in America, Europe, and the rest of the world over the last century” – and on the muggle sciences. Draco didn’t know what a microscope did and he hadn’t the slightest idea who Einstein was or what photosynthesis might possibly be. He had never heard of Lord Byron or a chap called Charles Dickens. He had some familiarity with mathematics, but only because those concepts were required for arithmancy.

He did better on the magical subjects, but he still seemed to have no idea about some of the subjects. He had heard stories about leprechauns, but had never met one personally and couldn’t answer questions about them. He demonstrated his familiarity with a number of spells, but hadn’t heard of a few they’d requested him to perform. Only servants would need to know ‘Air Cleaning Charms’ in any case.

Draco seemed appalled that physical exercise was an unofficially required part of the Scoil. He almost thought to say, ‘When my father hears about that...’ but he did stop himself in time.

“Well, Mr. Malfoy,” one of the tutors had said, “I think we’ll have to split you between years. You’ll take the standard first year tutorials for the nonmagical subjects. And the second year subjects for the magical subjects.”

“What? I would have been starting my third year at Hogwarts...”

“Ah, Mr. Malfoy. Our third year students take their O-levels at the end of the year. Are you confident enough in your schooling to do those weeks of testing at the end of this year?”

To that Draco had said nothing.

He returned home to Malfoy Manor and instructed the house elves to pack everything away. The books and heirlooms were to be sent to Gringotts for safe keeping. The portraits and furniture were to be covered with sheets, as they were all copies of originals already held in Gringotts. The elves, save for two, would be hired out to other families for the next few years. The two caretakers would tend to the gardens and perform minimal cleaning inside the manor.

Draco was about to give his life over to the Scoil as Draiocht Glas, even if they exercised like Muggles.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Albus Dumbledore knew the potion should be wearing off his new apprentice soon. He stalked over to the boy and toed him with his foot. The boy’s breathing pattern hitched and he began to wake.

“Up, up. You don’t want to miss the last bit of natural light you’ll ever see, boy. Let’s get this done. You have much to atone for, Harry.”

Harry’s eyes opened.

“Who... Dumbledore? Why are we here?”

“The Irish certainly have made you stupid, boy. You’re here because you belong to me. I sent you to your Muggle family. I selected the manner in which you would be raised. I had complete control over your life. And then you ran away like a coward. It was a hard road I had planned for you, but now it’ll just be worse. I’ll have to break every part of you before I can start reforming you. Painful process.

You'll wish you were still at Hogwarts after the day's done. You will know the true definition of cruelty."

"I don't...don't understand."

"You haven't the brains to understand, boy."

"What do you want with me?"

"I want from you what should have been mine from the beginning. I want Tom Riddle dead, Voldemort, that half-blood monster. But I never could destroy him, not even when I first dueled him when he was thirty-nine years old. I could hurt him, but never kill him. It was like there was something protecting him. And that something was you, Harry. All of Britain had to wait for your birth before someone could take out Voldemort...and now I want to be the one to finish him off for good. But it will have to be me acting through your pitiful body and mind. It was always supposed to be me."

Harry didn't speak for a while. Albus busied himself with preparing for the Apprenticeship Bonding Ritual.

"How did you go from hiding my mail to kidnapping me?"

Albus frowned when he looked over his shoulder. The still-drugged Harry was still laid out on the ground, but he was now capable of non-forced conversation.

"Like I said, boy, you are mine to do with as I please. I placed you with your relatives. They were perfect. You were nearly perfect, save for your blasted excess curiosity. Then you fouled things up. I will regain my place in the world, boy, once I have you as my apprentice. I'll have your loyalty, your magic, your money, even your life in the end. I will use you to destroy Tom Riddle and then we will be at balance again..."

"You're not thinking clearly if you believe the world will go back to what it was. I've only seen a few clippings about you since I left Hogwarts, but they'll never stop hunting you. They think you're completely insane, you know."

"I know...my glorious achievement, through you, that should shut them up."

"If I do it, then I get the credit. Your reputation..."

"You should shut your mouth, little goat-child. I could make a mistake with the knife during the ritual? You don't necessarily need to keep both eyes, do you, boy?"

"I know this ritual you're planning. We covered it in my wizarding culture class. You can't harm me in any way – or attempt to control my mind – or threaten me. I must participate of my own free will or else the magic will lash out at you."

Dumbledore snarled.

"You think you're so smart, eh? There is more than one bonding ritual, boy. I know them all, even the 'illegal' ones. You're about to learn one, too."

Harry just smiled.

A small smile, an arrogant smile, a smile that had lost Dumbledore all that owned or wanted. The old wizard stalked over to his apprentice and hoisted the boy off the grass. Then he commenced a Legilimency attack.

"I'll show you pain."

When Dumbledore entered Harry's mind, he saw only a lake, the Hogwarts Lake. Dumbledore moved and rolled and dove through the entire image. He was looking for the defenses, the weak points. He was looking for where the image was thinnest, where it did the least to keep Albus from the boy's memories.

Any Occlumency Dumbledore had ever seen could be beaten. People put up masks and barriers and traps. They could all be overcome...assuming one found the weakness.

He spent what seemed like hours inside Harry's mind trying to find a way past this lake defense. But it seemed the lake was truly the only thing inside Harry's mind. It was as if he had no thoughts, no memories, no sense of self. Only this lake. No one ever truly cleared their minds.

This was a trick.

Albus began to worry.

No human mind, even a Master Occlumens' mind, looked like this. Was this not Harry Potter he'd stolen? Was it a golem or another sort of construct? Albus had been so pleased when a boy showed up at the hospital asking the right question. What if the real Harry Potter had been more clever than Albus had expected? What if he'd created a replacement for himself...

Albus decided to back out of the mind. He needed to determine, before the bonding ritual, if this child or creation was even really a wizard. Whatever it turned out to be, it was a true horror. Albus had never felt quite so powerless in his long life. No one, not even Severus Snape, had successfully kept Dumbledore out of his mind. But, here, Albus couldn't even see that there was a mind.

Enough! He wanted to leave this lake.

That was when Albus found he couldn't withdraw from the lake-mind. He couldn't see a path out. Nothing was trying to expel him, either. He was, for the moment, trapped inside another's mind.

Albus was disconnected from his body. He was vulnerable, too. He began to panic even before he noticed something rise up out of the waters of the Hogwarts Lake. A massive tentacle wrapped itself around Albus' mental projection and flung him from this bizarre mind devoid of memories.

He felt relief for a brief moment when he realized he was back in his own body, his own mind.

His non-irrational fear began to quiet. He started deciding on what tests to use on this bizarre construct...when he noticed he couldn't see anything. He knew his eye lids were open. He knew he should be able to see. But there was nothing out there.

He grabbed for his wand, hidden in his dirty but still garish robes. It was missing. The Elder Wand he'd won by defeating Gellert was gone. His most powerful treasure, stolen... He bellowed like he'd been struck.

"Stop it. Now, we're going to have a chat and I'm going to figure out a few things, Dumbledore."

The rage that flowed through him had him wanting to tear the young snot limb from limb.

Albus tried running for the voice when he suddenly found himself trussed up in magical bindings. He fell to the ground in a heap.

"It seems your old wand, Dumbledore, is quite a piece of work. I barely flicked it at you and now you're disabled..."

"Give it back." Albus didn't care that he was practically groveling. His power was gone; his eyes were gone. Nothing made sense.

"Tell me why you kidnapped me."

"You have to be bound."

"Why?"

"To kill Voldemort."

"Didn't I kill him when I was a baby?"

"There's dead in the magical world and then there's dead. His body is gone, but he's still around. If you'd stuck around Hogwarts you'd have gotten to meet him, Harry..."

"You hired Voldemort to teach?"

The conversation went downhill from there as Dumbledore attempted to explain.

“You hired two different teachers who were possessed by Voldemort?”

Albus tried making excuses.

“I don’t care. Just tell me why I’m so important to you and Voldemort.”

Here Albus dissembled.

“Fine. Lie to me all you want. I am done with you.”

With that, Albus let out a sigh. He’d be able to regroup, to fix his eyes, to get Harry back in his control in the next days or weeks.

As he was relaxing and beginning to scheme again, he heard the most horrifying sound known to wizards and witches. He heard the sound of a wand snapping.

“What did you do?”

“I made myself safer.”

Albus screamed into his surroundings. His wand. His Elder Wand. Snapped. Its powerful magic released back into the world.

He wanted to deny it. He wanted to make that horrible brat admit it was a lie. But Albus could feel his magic weaken. He could feel himself beginning to age. He could feel the beginning notes of a dirge start playing in his mind.

Only the holders of the Elder Wand ever understood its true powers. As a powerful weapon, it had no peer. But along with the power, it also conferred a curse of sorts. It wanted its holders to die violently. It delayed aging so that its holders wouldn’t die natural deaths. It made its holders change: some became reckless, some cruel dictators,

others became great braggarts. All of them became targets of violence.

Albus felt himself beginning to succumb to age.

Finally he listened to his would-have-been apprentice again. "...I suppose the Underage Magic detectors would still work on me here. Maybe some folks from your Ministry of Magic might even show up to 'snap my wand.' Let's see what they might do with you, old man."

Albus felt the spray of water soak his robes. He never heard the incantation.

Harry would be right. The Ministry considered the boy a 'person of extreme interest.' They planned to make him a ward of the British Ministry as soon as they could get their hands on him (a plan Albus had proposed to Cornelius well over a year earlier, one that was still in effect).

Then he felt the magic in the area change. The boy had used a portkey to leave.

"How? I checked for his wand, for any portkeys? How did he do that?"

Albus didn't have long to wonder before he had some very curious company.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry landed in the forest clearing just outside the Scoil, the same spot he'd come to his first trip to the Scoil when he left Hogwarts. He quickly jogged the path through the seven caverns and into the Scoil.

He stopped at the open fireplace near the main entrance. He pulled out a handful of floo powder and said, "Black's Sirius Estate."

A house elf answered the floo call. Remus Lupin poked his head into the flames moments later.

"Thank Merlin, Remus. I thought he'd lied to me. You're safe..."

“Harry? What are you talking about?”

“I went to the hospital because of the letter, then I woke up on the grass outside a cave. Dumbledore...”

“Dumbledore?”

“He took me there somehow.”

“Harry, stop. Listen. Are you safe? Are you hurt in any way?”

Harry just smiled.

“Remus, I’m fine. My mind’s just a bit shaken up. I’m back at the Scoil right now...”

“Good. Stay there... No, get ready to come back to the Manor. I’ll get in touch with Padfoot. He’s in Breste, I think. He’ll want you back here, I know...”

Harry just nodded. “I’ll floo call you back in twenty minutes. I’d better see if I can find the Headmaster and explain this to him...”

Remus looked harried as he nodded and disappeared from the fire.

Harry stood up, sighed, and went looking for Orion Murphy-Black. It was going to be a long day.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Bellatrix apparated to just outside where her supposed ‘Master’ had told her to meet him. She sighed in anger. She could feel the half-formed bond she’d sworn to the old geezer unraveling – as she hadn’t said the proper words, only swore for her freedom – but it was still in effect at the present moment.

She moved forward toward the dingy caverns the man favored. She stopped short...

There were four red-robed Aurors surrounding Albus Dumbledore, who was bound on the ground. In that moment, he looked truly old and helpless. His head was moving and he was talking as if he were blinded somehow. He was bound in magical chains. How had he been brought down so cleanly? Even four against one, Dumbledore should have knocked them all down.

She paused and observed.

She noticed when a tawny owl with a letter winged into view. Bellatrix silently summoned the letter away. It slid into her hands. She read a bureaucratic notice advising one Harry Potter that his Misuse of Underage Magic with a watering charm had been recorded and that Aurors had been dispatched to detain and interrogate him (and, Bellatrix assumed, force him back into Hogwarts...she had read the old papers after she'd determined her 'Master's' identity).

The fool had found Harry Potter, then.

The fool had obviously been bested by Potter somehow – and it wasn't with a watering charm. And Potter's use of his own wand had served to draw the Aurors here to find this surprisingly frail Dumbledore.

Was this his moment of weakness? Could she begin her own plans? Ordinarily the bond she'd accepted from Dumbledore should have kept even the mere idea out of her head. But with the exposure of his weakness, and of his being bested by a child, the bond snapped inside her mind.

Bellatrix's smile grew wide and malicious.

If Potter was as powerful as this scene suggested, then perhaps it was better to use Voldemort's other great enemy in the necessary rituals to restore him to life. In fact, there were even certain advantages to using Dumbledore...namely, that was he available right now.

She carefully aimed her wand from behind the tree she'd used as an observation post.

“Avada Kedavra.” One Auror fell.

“Avada Kedavra.” A second. No one had yet turned to see Bellatrix.

She paused for a second to see what there reactions would be. One pivoted much faster than the other. “Avada Kedavra.” That Auror also dodged better.

She turned to the final Auror. “Crucio.” The man fell to the ground in pain. When she looked up, that tricky third Auror had disappeared. When she looked back to her fourth Auror, he too was gone.

Bellatrix felt stupid. She’d gotten distracted, sloppy. That third Auror had saved himself and his partner. Still, she had the prize, Dumbledore. But wouldn’t it have been a better gift to leave all four Aurors dead for the Ministry to find?

They were so incompetent they might have blamed the whole thing on Harry Potter. Bellatrix decided to kill every one of them, even the purebloods, because of their incompetence. The Dark Lord valued blood, but Bellatrix was even more selective, as any Black should be.

To her mind, dulled and twisted by a decade in Azkaban, the blood traitors weren’t the worst sort of pureblood. No, the worst were weak, incompetent purebloods who’d obviously destroyed the greatness of their lines in some way. The Goyles and Crabbes might have followed her Lord, but Bellatrix would rather put them to the wand and end their weak lines. They were stupid, ineffective bumbler.

No Goyle or Crabbe should ever be permitted to breed.

The very idea made her angry. It took a few moments, but she decided to channel the anger. She had Dumbledore and knew, roughly, how to go about retrieving her true Master. But, what to do with the Ministry of Fools?

She smiled a devious smile.

Yes, a plan for the Ministry formed in her mind. And another plan for the most irritating little boy who'd deprived her Master of his body in the first place.

Bellatrix stalked the dozen meters toward where Dumbledore lie in the grass. She clutched his arm and before he could ask what was happening, she disappeared with him.

Bellatrix Lestrange had work to do.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter was annoyed. He'd been captured by Dumbledore, escaped from Dumbledore, floo called home to let everyone know what had happened...and now he was confined to bed for no particular reason.

"Really, I'm fine, Remus."

"Sirius said you needed to rest."

"Sirius hasn't seen me today. He's in France."

"He's on his way back. He's a jokester most of the time, but he was truly upset today. So, do us all a favor. Stay in the bed, right?"

"Can I have something to read?"

"No. You can nap, though."

"Surprisingly I'm not tired. Adrenaline."

"Then just close your eyes and meditate. Pretend like you're sleeping, Harry."

He rolled his eyes at that. He didn't say anything, but just slipped into a trance. His lake was beautiful – and deadly. It had a massive squid inside it and many other traps and dangers for people like Dumbledore. Harry couldn't help but feel grateful now to his odd tutor, Aleksandr Dobrydin, for training him in this odd meditation he did. His

mental 'blankness' had allowed him to trap Dumbledore inside his mind – while his hands were stealing Dumbledore's wand and casting the blinding curse at the kidnapper.

It was possibly the most useful piece of magic he'd learned since he was eleven. All it took was making Dumbledore angry enough to invade his mind.

Harry descended into his mind. He worked through some of the exercises he'd learned a year ago. He couldn't perform any controlled wandless magic, which could have proven useful in today's encounter, but he was getting closer.

He was preparing to start the meditative exercises that would allow Harry to meet his animal form(s). He was preparing to master more of his exercises. He had three down so well they were instantaneous. He tried them out daily to keep them fresh, but they were mastered. That left thirty more – most of which he was passingly fair in performing. But not expert.

Harry reached out to try to touch his animal form when he felt a hand shaking his body, bidding him awake.

"...wake up for a moment, Harry. I need to have the Healer examine you..."

"I wasn't sleeping, Remus."

"I've been trying to rouse you for a few minutes, Harry."

"You said to meditate, so I did. I'm ready to see your Healer."

Harry quickly came to regret his words. The Healer fussed over him for an hour before Sirius returned looking cadaverous in fright. Then three representatives from the Irish Ministry poked their heads into the fire and asked for permission to visit – they were apparently following up on a complaint of Underage Magic in Britain.

"Yes," Harry said, "I did use my wand in Britain."

One official looked surprised. "I imagine there's a story behind that?"

Harry nodded. "I received a letter this morning from the magical hospital in Dublin. It said that Mr. Lupin here had been admitted and wished me to know that I was welcome to visit. So I went. When I got there, something knocked me unconscious. I awoke hours and hours later in a place I did not recognize. Albus Dumbledore..."

"What?"

"The former Headmaster of Hogwarts had taken me from the hospital somehow. I taunted him until he attacked me with his mind arts. That's when I was able to disarm him..."

"Hold on," the official said. "Dumbledore performed legilimency on you. And you used the opportunity to disarm him?"

Harry nodded. "A tutor of mine showed me a number of exercises. The first one is designed to help me clear my mind. It's not like the Occlumency techniques I read about at the Scoil. I didn't build traps and walls and shields – or layer my mind with false memories. I just cleared my mind of everything but a single image and kept it clear. I even trapped Dumbledore for a time..."

"You overpowered him in a mental attack?" The official sounded more than skeptical.

"Not so much overpowered, as hid the way out. He got in with no trouble, but he couldn't leave..."

The official began to nod. It made sense. Hiding knowledge didn't take raw power, which Dumbledore had in excess, it took cunning. The kid, if trained as he said he was, could certainly do that. The other two were jotting notes like crazy.

"Fine. You said you disarmed him?"

Harry smiled. "I've trained to keep my mind clear while doing other things, like running. So I kept Dumbledore busy inside my mind, while I took his wand off him. I used his own wand to cast Caeco on him so

he'd be at a disadvantage when he returned to his body. Then I ejected him from my mind..."

"You had enough strength to do that?"

"It wasn't strength so much as training. One of the exercises after perfecting the 'clearing' process is to have helpful creatures or other things lurk in the clarity. I used a Giant Squid to throw him from my mind..."

Sirius, who had kept quiet during the interrogation, suddenly began laughing. "He does have James' sense of humor..."

The official frowned at Sirius, who went silent again.

"I tried asking him some questions, but he only said stupid, nonsensical things back to me. Like how I belonged to him, how it was his destiny to destroy Voldemort but I'd taken it away from him. That's when I got tired of him. I used my own wand to perform a watering charm on Dumbledore to summon the Aurors..."

"Watering charm to summon Aurors?"

"I figured their Ministry would be looking for Underage Magic – Ireland couldn't care less, as long as it's not in front of the nonmagical – so I did a bit of unimportant magic to get them to come..."

"That's the issue, Mr. Potter. Four Aurors did arrive. Two of them were killed, two survived..."

"Dumbledore did it? But I snapped his wand..."

Sirius couldn't hold back. "You took and snapped Dumbledore's wand? In all my years, I've never heard of such a thing..."

The official butted back in. "Nor have I. I will mention it in my report. Along with the fact you used the British underage laws to try to summon help. I assume you used a portkey to get away?" /p>

Harry nodded. "I keep my wand and portkey on me at all times. I'm sure Dumbledore searched for them but he'd never be able to find them..."

"Can you tell me why?"

Harry shook his head. "Sorry. I'm sworn to secrecy on the exact method, sir. But it's nothing illegal..."

Sirius smiled and nodded. "I am also in on that secret, gentlemen, and I assure you it is nothing illegal. Harry would be willing to take a truth serum to swear to it, so long as you take an oath not to ask him the actual method he uses..."

The official noted it down. "Not my call. As for Dumbledore and those fallen Aurors, it seems that the escaped prisoner Bellatrix Lestrangle..."

Both Remus and Sirius looked shocked at that name. "When did she break out of Azkaban? It's not been in the news..." Their angry, terrified words jumbled together into one long question.

"She's been out for a long time. The British Ministry just informed me and my team today. She's the one who has been causing havoc – that nasty business at Blarney Castle this morning, for instance. Bunch of idiots in London. Earned themselves more than a few enemies by keeping secrets..."

Sirius looked ready to activate the 'death wards' around the Black Estate. No one in or out – try to cross the wards and see what interesting form of death you'll receive. Sirius had been raised in the Black family after all. They were paranoid and brilliant and not averse to senseless killings.

Remus looked as though he wanted to make contact with a few werewolves he knew in London, pass them a few names of Ministry officials.

"...anyway, the two survivors swear it was Lestrangle. The Ministry has suspected that Dumbledore broke her out in the first place.

They're going to try to keep all this quiet, but I'll make sure the Irish at least know what's going on... If only we had some belonging of hers or Dumbledore's, like hair or clothing or something personal. We could erect some wards to keep them out, permanently..."

At that, Sirius was up and out of the room. He came back in a few moments later carrying a box.

"When I took the place over again, I collected up everything that screamed Black and put it in this box. I know some of this belonged to Bellatrix and Narcissa Malfoy. Can't help you with Dumbledore..."

Harry spoke up. "Maybe I can." He raised his hand. "It's not much, but I got a splinter in my hand when I snapped Dumbledore's wand..."

The interrogation and planning session lasted for another hour. Remus practically drafted the statement he expected to see in the paper tomorrow.

Harry fell asleep after a Healer dosed him with a Sleeping Draught.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry was glad to be back in the Scoil. He could hide better from the overprotective Sirius and Remus. Both of the adults in his life had followed him to the Scoil: Sirius to continue work on his Mastery in Warding; Remus to pick up a formal Mastery in Dueling. But here they were busy and couldn't pester Harry quite as much as usual.

They also trusted that all of them were reasonably safe in a place that outsiders couldn't access – and that no one could leave, save in an emergency.

He was also glad to be back in the Scoil as Britain's magical government had fallen again the day term started. Lying about Bellatrix Lestrangle's escape from Azkaban had cleared out the Minister, the top layers of folks in the Magical Law Enforcement Department, and had seen a general purge of anyone aligned with the pureblood cause. Funny...it had only taken ten years, a prison break, and a coverup to make these things happen.

That kind of chaos associated with a new government just across the way made Harry glad to be behind strong wards.

Inside the Scoil, Harry could concentrate on his classes, on flying and dueling (but not at the same time) with Victor a few times per week, on taking dinner with Remus and Sirius.

Charms, Hexes, and Jinxes had also begun incorporating Curses of various types. Harry enjoyed this year's class much more than the second year version. Most of the charms related to dueling or defense in some way. The most interesting one in his first term was the Patronus Charm. Ireland didn't have Dementors or Lethifolds, but Britain was just next door and had a history of its Dementors doing whatever they wanted.

This particular charm had been marked 'optional' as it was important to know about, but wouldn't be covered on the O-levels. Still, Harry worked on it. When Harry finally mastered the Charm a few weeks after the introductory tutorial, he found a rather daunting looking Grim patrolling around his room. It was Sirius' animagus form.

Harry had wondered if he'd have something to remind him of his mother or father. Instead it was a reminder about one of the people still remaining for Harry.

"Nice."

The rest of that day went well for Harry. He had reserved a bench in the potions lab for most of the afternoon, save lunch, as he'd been assigned five potions for the week. He had three more days before meeting with his tutor, but he wanted to allow some time for mistakes.

Harry brewed two potions at a time after he arrived in the lab. He had eaten a salad and a half sandwich for lunch to make sure he wouldn't fall asleep in lab from overeating. The first batch was the Beautification Potion and Draught of Peace.

Neither was terribly challenging. His second round consisted of the Fire Protection Potion and an Invigoration Draught. His final round

consisted of the tricky love potion Amortentia. Slicing frozen Ashwinder eggs was a tricky thing to do.

Harry wondered about the particular sequence of these five potions. Did his female tutor have a need for them? Beauty and love potions, plus the ultimate in calming potions... It seemed, well, odd. Harry hoped she wasn't trying to pursue Sirius or Remus. That would be just – disgusting.

Harry cleaned up his work bench, sealed all five potions vials, and walked back to his room. He placed the vials in his potions vault (all student rooms had them to prevent unexpected explosions from harming the students).

He sat with Victor at dinner while they both wondered over the ridiculous amount of work they had this year.

"I wonder if I could get Professor Invictus to let me build a time turner for a special project..."

Harry snorted. "You'd get it a whole year late for O-levels, then. Why bother?"

"Merlin, Harry. Can't you not argue with me for once? It's a good idea..."

"I'll stop arguing with you, Vic, when the idea's sound. Wouldn't want your brain to turn to mush, would I?"

"Fat chance of that happening..."

Eventually both boys were laughing.

"We still dueling tomorrow at ten?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, my tutorial tomorrow is at eight thirty. I'll meet you in front of your room after, then we can go find a free room..."

"Very good."

Harry walked off to his first 'lesson' with Professor Bastata, the guy who was interested in soul magics. Harry had no idea why this teacher, who usually only bothered with the Master's candidates, wanted to meet him. That was the way of the Scoil. Professors taught Master's candidates, the candidates taught the younger students, the students pillaged their tutors and the library for whatever they could.

A lesson with a Professor was a different way of the world.

"Mr. Potter, please have a seat. I'm glad to have the chance to meet you, although I should say I've been feeling your presence ever since you arrived..."

"Excuse me, sir?" Harry was beginning to have a bad feeling about this man. Was he another Snape?

"I've been conducting research into soul magic for seven years now. My experiments proceeded along via expected paths until two years ago, until more precisely you arrived in Ireland from Britain."

"I'm sorry sir." It was a hesitant sort of apology.

The professor waved it off. "Nonsense. You didn't know. I didn't even know what was happening until I started trying to figure out what the interference was. And, my young Mister Potter, I have to tell you that you have a most unusual trait..."

Harry almost frowned. What was stranger than being a metamorphmagus – and a parselmouth?

"Sir?"

"You have more than one soul in your body..."

Harry sat shock still for quite a bit of time. "Excuse me?"

"I know. I know, very odd. But, as I examined what was ruining my experiments into non-violent methods for performing soul magics, I kept getting off results. Results that your odd affliction, your curse scar, seemed to bring about..."

“My scar is someone’s soul?”

“Part of one... We can remove it, of course, without too much difficulty. Just have to take it from you and put it into a new vessel, you see. Soul fragments have always been able, more or less, to travel from vessel to vessel. It’ll be much easier to destroy the pesky little thing if you’re not tied to it, of course...”

Harry went pale.

“Oh, yes, anyone ignorant enough to try to destroy it while you were still attached to the thing would wind up killing you. No, much better just to move it and then destroy it...”

Harry just nodded a few times. “Is it Voldemort’s soul, then?”

The Professor looked contemplative for a moment. “I’d expect it is. I’ve heard rumors that he studied soul magic – the very black sort – with Alain Ventrikoff a few decades earlier. Certainly Ventrikoff died around that time...perhaps this Voldemort fellow did him in. Can’t say for certain. The black arts surrounding the soul are very perilous under any circumstances. Even scared people off researching the flip side of the soul magics field...”

Harry had no idea what the professor was speaking of, but did seem interested in getting rid of his scar.

“How do we move my scar then? Get rid of this extra bit of soul in me?”

“The process is safe but a bit laborious. I’ll need to discuss this with you again once I’ve begun the preparations. I’ll need to do some diagnostics at that time, as well. Perhaps your guardian, Mr. Black, would care to join us...”

“I’d say you couldn’t prevent that if you tried, sir.”

The Professor seemed to smile. “I had assumed as much.”

Harry and the professor spent another twenty minutes discussing what Voldemort might have done with soul magics – and why Harry might have an extra bit inside him.

“So...these horcruxes...are they the reason that Albus Dumbledore thinks that Voldemort is still around in some form?”

“Yes, Harry. That would be the exact reason.”

“Does anyone know how many one can make? Am I the only one?”

“I doubt you’re it, Harry. The portion of additional soul inside you is small. Large enough to cause problems but not enough to invade your mind and possess you...”

Harry felt sick.

“Send me a note when you’re ready for me to come in again. I want this thing out of me...”

“My pleasure.”

Harry went to his room and found he couldn’t read his assignments. He lapsed into his meditative exercises just to keep himself from brooding. How had no one from the magical world noticed what his curse scar was? Or had they held it back from him? That Dumbledore fellow probably had an idea.

Harry wanted to scream, but his focus on the calm lake inside his mind kept him safe and calm. He walked through his exercises slowly, but with a lot of precision. He now felt comfortable saying he’d mastered five of them. He was improving in a number of them nearly every evening.

His animagus forms still didn’t want to cooperate, but Harry knew that would be a difficult exercise to master.

He gave in to the exercises and tried not to think. Not to worry. Not to scream.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry caught up with his friend Vic the next morning.

“Got a dueling chamber?”

Vic smiled and led the way. Harry knew that smile. Vic had at least one new trick up his sleeve.

The boys entered the room and began a friendly duel. The pair usually also had a few other students join them on Fridays or Saturday afternoons. But a Wednesday session before lunch didn't fit into the schedules of many others.

Harry and Vic were well into their magical duel when a third person entered the room, conjured up a simple wooden chair, and watched.

Harry trained harder and in different ways from his friend Vic, so Harry usually fought with a handicap. For the present situation, Harry had his normal wand arm deadened. It hung limply by side. (He also fought with his wand left in the middle of the dueling platform at the beginning of the match – and with his eyes blinded – and with a silencing charm on – and in other ways, too.)

Harry fighting with a deadened arm was perhaps Vic's favorite disadvantage because Harry wasn't ambidextrous. He really struggled to use his wand in the wrong hand. So Harry had to pursue more of a thinking battle than a spell battle.

The visitor to the dueling room went unnoticed by the competitors but he was very interested in what he saw.

Potter dodged spells left and right. He ducked and swerved and finally cast. He was much slower casting with his left arm for some reason...of course, Draco Malfoy was ambidextrous so he'd didn't see using his left hand as a disadvantage.

Harry finally got exposed to Vic's little plan.

“Bombarda Lucis.”

The room positively lit up in a disturbing array of vivid colors. They began to swirl and pulse. Harry was almost blinded by them, but the silly things didn't seem to affect Victor at all. Was the room really filled with colors? Or had Vic cast some sort of confundus-like charm on him?

Harry soon found himself having to close his eyes to keep the 'psychedelic colors' from overwhelming him. He was disarmed shortly thereafter.

"Vic, that was an awesome effect. I'll use it on you in these matches, you know."

"I would expect nothing less."

Harry finally turned and noticed their unexpected visitor.

"Enjoy the demonstration?"

"Very good, Potter. Dueling with a disabled arm...never would have thought to try it out."

Harry didn't really have anything to say back. He'd seen Draco around the Scoil, but he didn't know the kid, apart from a few unpleasant, semi-bullying moments back at Hogwarts. Harry had only spent two weeks there.

Harry was trying to give the kid a chance. He didn't come across as a bully or a prat here at the Scoil.

"How are you liking the Scoil?"

"The teachers for the magical classes are good. I like being self-directed. Always been fairly independent, you know, a Malfoy family trait. The library's excellent. But, the...Muggle subjects I've never studied before. It's kind of rough."

Harry nodded. He'd heard some of the other students raised in magic-only environments say the same things.

“Miss your friends from Hogwarts?”

Draco shrugged. “I miss Pansy, but she disappeared from the school. No one really knows what happened to her. Crabbe and Goyle withdrew after Parkinson disappeared. No pureblood parents like thinking that other purebloods could be kidnapped that way, you know...”

“You know, Draco, I think you might have found Franklin Academy in America a good fit. It’s not as old as Hogwarts by any means, but they focus on a magic-only curriculum...”

“I looked into it. Didn’t get back terribly good reports. It also has the classes I’m struggling with. If the...Muggle classwork gets overwhelming, I guess I’ll just go get myself tutors and pass my exams that way.”

“Lonely life.”

“Being a Malfoy generally can be lonely.”

“Not so different from being the Boy-Who-Lived.”

Harry introduced Victor then and the three chatted until it was time for lunch. As the three were preparing to leave the room, Harry stuck out his hand. “Hello, I’m Harry Potter.”

“Nice to meet you, Harry. I’m Draco Malfoy.”

That was the last time they spoke together at the Scoil, aside from brief hellos in the hallways. Draco, as Harry had suspected, withdrew from the Scoil after his first term, citing his ‘lack of preparation with...Muggle subjects.’

When he thought of the strange blonde kid, Harry would sometimes wonder if Draco had only come to the Scoil for a chance to make a second impression on Harry Potter. He never did find out.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Bellatrix was actually quite accomplished at the Dark Arts. Her particular favorite wasn't the Cruciatus Curse, as many would have guessed. No, her specialty was the Imperius Curse. Her personal record was holding Millicent Bagnold, before she became Minister of Magic, under the Curse for eighty-four days without renewal. Oh, the things Bellatrix had made the woman do...

In the present moment, it amused her greatly to see the weakened and beaten looking Dumbledore following her every whim as she prepared for the first of many rituals over the next few months or years.

He made for an adequate servant, even if he was disheveled and a bit of a shambles.

Bellatrix pulled out the old sheaf of parchment and read through the first page again. "For emergency use only, Bellatrix. I am embarking on a potentially dangerous mission. If you have lost contact with me for more than two years, take the chalice I have entrusted you with and perform the following ritual. This will allow you to locate me, even if I am no longer in a form you can see with your eyes. The dark rituals I have used on myself have given me a sort of immortal bond to the Earth, though I may still lose my mortal body..."

"Servant," Bellatrix said, addressing Dumbledore, "you will add the sliced unicorn brain to the cauldron now. Keep stirring as if your life depended upon it. The phoenix ash will go into the cauldron in thirty minutes."

Dumbledore moved like an automaton. He was supposed to be this incredible thing, but he was also an old man. His will was weaker than Bellatrix's. He was fading. She had to ensure he lasted until her true Master's resurrection, but beyond that...perhaps he would die of his own accord.

The great Albus Dumbledore, felled not by an opponent but by weakness and age. It was fitting, wasn't it? The fool didn't deserve a warrior's death.

Two hours later, Bellatrix brought out the badger chalice she'd held in the Lestrange vault for the last two decades. She walked over to the cauldron. "Servant, chop off your wand hand and let it fall into the cauldron. Use this obsidian knife."

And Dumbledore did exactly that. Bellatrix used a cauterizing curse to keep him alive.

The murky brown liquid in the cauldron became blue and almost translucent, like the most beautiful parts of the ocean, the waters most perfect for swimming.

Bellatrix dipped the special chalice in the calming blue liquid. Then she stepped over to the ritual area she had prepared to Voldemort's instructions. She poured the goblet full of liquid into the center of the runic circle. Bellatrix then placed the chalice in the center of the rapidly spreading liquid. It wasn't absorbing into the prepared sand. It was actually standing an inch above it. And then the vast circle of blue began to transform. Bits of the sand underneath the blue liquid began to elongate and transform into...into a representation of Britain and another for Ireland. The blue liquid now looked even more like the ocean.

Tiny sparks of light flickered into view. That was what concerned Bellatrix. She'd expected only one – the location of her master. But there was a spark about where Hogwarts was, another in the middle of the map near nothing Bellatrix could identify, one flickering light in Ireland, and then two in the center of London.

It was confusing.

She locked Dumbledore up in his cell for the night before she returned to the map and continued staring over it. How could her true Master be in five different places at the same time? And why wasn't he moving at all?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Come in, Mr. Potter. Busy year I take it?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Wonderful. Let’s get through the formalities first, shall we? I have to confirm which subjects you wish to sit for your O-levels later this year. It’s common courtesy to inform the examiners about which subjects to write tests for...”

“They’re writing tests just for our school?”

“No, Harry. The International Standard tests are given in thirty nine countries.”

“I see. Well, it’s a good thing I wrote a list, then. It’s sort of lengthy.”

“That’s fine. I’ll just tick the boxes on my form as you read them off then.”

“Yes, sir. I’d like to sit Dueling and Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology, Magical History, Potions, Runes, Arithmancy, Study of Other Magical Races, Magical Languages, Warding...”

“Hold up, Harry. I don’t believe you’ve taken a tutorial in wards, so why do you want to sit the O-level?”

Harry smiled a bit. “Well, I never had that course on my schedule, but I’m sure Sirius has shown me enough to be fine. Plus I’ve read a few of the introductory books. The man wouldn’t even let me leave Black Estate for a solid week after what happened with Dumbledore...”

“Fine, Mr. Potter. I’ll put you down for the subject. From what I remember when I served as an examiner a few years ago, almost no one sits the subject at O-level. Should be interesting...”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And your other selections?”

“English Language and Literature, European History, World History, Latin, French, German, Chemistry, Physics, Politics, Economics, Anthropology and Archaeology, and Mathematics.”

“Not Philosophy? Students of PPE usually take Politics, Philosophy, and Economics...”

“Didn’t take to it... I much prefer the politics and economics portions, if that’s all right.”

The Headmaster ticked away at his form.

“Yes, yes. I just wanted to be sure you had considered the subject. Also, I just wanted to ensure you knew how these tests operate. They’re each graded on a seven point scale. You need to achieve a 6 or a 7 in at least four magical subjects to continue your studies here...”

“Yes, sir, I was aware of that.”

“...and your actual results on the nonmagical subjects are reported to the Irish Department of Educational Affairs. The exams are accepted worldwide to prove your educational credentials, they just call them the International Baccalaureate. Most systems may require you to take a few more sets of general tests, such as the SATs in the U.S., but the IB carries a lot of weight.”

Harry just nodded.

“Have you given any thought to your post-Scoil plans?”

“A bit, sir. If the Dumbledore issue isn’t resolved, I may stay on after my N-levels and first mastery and pursue a second one. If it’s resolved, I think I’d like to attend a nonmagical university. As for working, I’ve always been fascinated by ancient Egypt and I loved the tutorial on archaeology I took. Perhaps I’ll see if I can work for the goblins for a while – or fund my own expeditions...”

“Curse and ward-breaking, eh? Got to have a great mind and a hell of a lot of courage to do that, Harry. But I think you’d acquit yourself well.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“How has your unofficial dueling group been going?”

“We don’t let jerks or bullies in. It’s a lot of fun.”

The Headmaster smiled. “As you know, the new rules on bullying passed during the term. They’ll go into effect at the beginning of next term. I hope you’re...”

“Sir, the rules weren’t for me. I asked for better vigilance from the staff, but not for me.”

“Yes, I remember. Well, hopefully they will have the intended effect.”

The Headmaster went silent for a moment. Harry recognized that the man was gearing up to mention something unpleasant.

“I received a clipping from the Muggle Affairs Department at the Irish Ministry a few days ago. I didn’t want to distract you from your end-of-term exams, so I waited until now to share it with you.”

The Headmaster handed Harry a piece of paper.

“Porn Theatre Manager ‘Mr. Rough’ Dead at Age 53

“Local denizens of London’s seedier venues will probably be familiar with ‘Mr. Rough’ who has managed three different theatres in the last five years, including the infamous Beckonridge. No one knew his real name until this newspaper learned of his passing. After researching the name, we’ve learned his true name was Vernon Dursley, of Little Whinging, Surrey, a nice suburban bedroom community...”

“What,” Harry said. “He sold drills...”

“Apparently you uncle did sell drills at one point in his life, but he hasn’t in quite some time. He had grabby hands, or so the folks at the Ministry found out, and was sacked after a few complaints from other employees. His wife, your aunt, knew nothing about his real job, although the Ministry thinks he was hoping to bring his son, Dudley, into the ‘family business,’ so to speak...”

Harry couldn't figure out what to say. The whole idea was monstrous. Harry was labeled a 'freak,' while his uncle facilitated the screening of pornographic movies?

"What did he die of?"

"Well, it seems his wandering hands never went away. He just found people in his new job who were more inclined toward his suggestions. He had untreated syphilis..."

Harry just sat and stared. For all the abuse he'd received in his young life, for all of it to come from a man like Vernon Dursley. Harry felt angry, felt like laughing, felt like cursing his uncle's dead body, felt like never thinking of the brutal man again.

"I guess he always lashed out at me to deflect attention away from himself... I'll have to tell Sirius and Remus."

The Headmaster just nodded.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry was sitting at a Quidditch Match between the Harpies and the Dublin Dragons. But his mind was elsewhere. It was on the dead Vernon Dursley. It was on the still at-large Albus Dumbledore. It was on the British magical government, which was again trying to repatriate Harry to Britain.

Harry didn't care for those who would try to live his life for him.

In London, at that exact moment, a group of witches and wizards were assaulting the British Ministry of Magic. They had planned for a good long while. Bellatrix Lestrange was at their head.

She had recovered some of the freed members of the Death Eaters – she had cursed each of them soundly for escaping punishment, but she had brought them back into the fold. Augustus Rookwood had set up most of the arrangements for the day. There were almost no living souls inside the Ministry building, as an accident in the experimental

potions department late the previous night had forced a building wide closure. (Augustus no longer worked for the Ministry, of course, but still had a few quiet supporters there.)

Bellatrix did find a few individuals who'd resisted the evacuation order. The Auror Pius Thicknesse went under the Imperius Curse. A nameless Unspeakable joined him. Three house elves cleaning on the third level were obliterated, as the team was attempting to leave as few footprints as possible.

In Dublin, Harry watched the two seekers winging through the air looking for the Snitch. Harry had spotted it only once, but neither Seeker had flown after it then. The game was well matched between the teams; the score was 110-100. Harry watched as much as he could. But he just felt uncomfortable.

He didn't exactly fear another kidnapping. After all, he didn't look like Harry Potter right now. He was taller than normal, heavier set, with brown hair and no scar. He'd had to let Victor in on the secret, as Sirius and Remus had already known, but Victor had just said 'cool.' It was nice to have friends who wouldn't be jealous prats...

He felt sick. There was something happening in the world, something connected to his stupid soul connection with Voldemort. His entire body was screaming in agonizing anticipation.

In the Ministry building, Bellatrix and her crew moved swiftly through the Department of Mysteries. She'd worked with the ritual map enough to narrow down where her true Master was. She'd already visited several other sites, such as Little Hangleton. She'd retrieved a ring from there that registered, somehow, as being Lord Voldemort.

She'd also dispatched other teams to invade a Muggle house in London where a strong signal was also coming from. Merlin help Walden McNair if he screwed it up.

She entered a strange room filled with trinkets that were bound with the strongest wards she'd ever felt. She began casting her detection spells.

“Rookwood, get looking. Stop trying to see what you can steal. I promise you pain and blood if we’re not out of here in ten minutes.”

Even Nott and Goyle got that message. Her team of five began searching the entire room.

Mulciber was the one who found the massive piece of stone – the one that came from near the Romanian Dragon Reserve – that registered as Lord Voldemort.

“Damn it. How will we figure out which one to set free. One of these objects holds his free-form spirit. That’s the one we need for the ritual. If I read the notes correctly, we can’t be mistaken on this...not at all.”

They left the Ministry quickly. They also left a number of interesting presents behind for those unfortunate enough to discover them.

Back in Dublin, Harry was almost slumped over with exhaustion. Something had registered so strongly in his mind and emotions that he didn’t know how to begin to speak of it.

Harry didn’t even move after the Dragons’ Seeker caught the Snitch. Most everyone else was on their feet applauding.

Victor was the first to notice. “Harry, mate, you alright?”

Harry just shook his head. He couldn’t explain it. In fact, he wouldn’t understand what this day had been about for a good long time.

In London, Bellatrix, her team, and the secondary retrieval team met up.

McNair had a smile. “Had to kill some Muggles, but we found this locket inside a sealed room. Only a wizard could get inside it. Place was filled with Dark artifacts...”

“I know, Walden. It was my aunt and uncle’s home.” Walden scowled. He’d been planning to make the whole adventure out to be a lot more than it was. “Any muggles who set foot inside the House of Black, let alone presume to own it, deserve to die. You did that much correctly.”

It was faint praise. “Now we only need to collect an item from Hogwarts and from some place I can’t identify in Ireland.”

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The second term at the Scoil began and, in that first week, Harry had his meeting with Professor Bastata, along with Sirius and Remus.

While the two adults tried to figure out exactly how dangerous the procedure would be, Harry just wanted the conversation to be over.

“Enough. I don’t want whatever Voldemort did to me. I want it gone. If the Professor here is sure it will work – and I’ve been reading up a bit on soul magics since last term – then I want him to do it.”

“But...” Sirius didn’t even get his objection out of his mouth.

“Sirius, if you had a cancer inside you and the healers told you they had to do a muggle-style, risky surgery to get rid of it, would you say yes?”

Remus looked flummoxed. He had spent his life between the nonmagical and magical worlds. He understood. Sirius did not.

“But...”

“Sirius, I have a piece of Voldemort in my head. How would you like to have his toe on your foot? Or his spleen inside you? I have a bit of his soul in my head. It’s the foulest thing I could imagine.”

At that, Sirius deflated a bit.

“It’s so dangerous, Harry.”

“I know, Sirius. But I’ve been thinking about this a lot. I want to be rid of this thing inside me.”

That was the last word. The Professor performed his diagnostics and said that the procedure could be done as early as Saturday.

“I’ll be here.”

Sirius grumbled that he would be along to view it as well. Remus just nodded.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

After the random piece of soul magic was moved from Harry’s head – and destroyed once in its new home – Harry found his meditative exercises to be much easier to practice. He hadn’t realized it until now, but he’d been fighting that bit of soul to be able to do his mental work.

Everything felt so much freer, easier.

It seemed now that ever since Voldemort had attacked him and his parents, Voldemort’s soul had been opposing and weakening Harry. He wasn’t Superman now, by any means. He still needed to wear glasses and he still liked to procrastinate in preparing some of his essays, especially for tutors he didn’t care for.

However, thinking became easier for him. It wasn’t like he was pushing through a cloud of pain every time he wanted to remember or process something.

His scar also began to fade. Perhaps, with time, it would disappear completely? Harry didn’t think he could possibly be so lucky, but he could wish.

Harry slipped into his meditation and performed the first twelve exercises perfectly in thirty minutes. He had now mastered all of them. He was also finally gaining some traction on identifying his animagus form(s). He thought another couple of weeks work would have at least knowing the basic outline of what he could transform into.

Harry began continued work on the thirteenth exercise: attuning his own body’s magic so that he could read and understand the magic around him. It was a skill all true curse- and ward-breakers needed to learn. One couldn’t stop inside a crypt if one didn’t see the trap in the first place.

Once Harry mastered the skill of seeing magic, he'd never be caught out again by any of Sirius' spell or ward based pranks. (Though he'd still have to be careful for the potions based ones or the ones without any magic in them at all.)

He spent another hour before bedtime practicing the skill. It would be a long time in mastering. That was one of the reasons cursebreakers charged so much for their services – the effort of learning 'magic reading' was prohibitive, plus there was always the danger of being in a place that required extensive cursebreaking. Walking into a cursed tomb – or a heavily warded enemy residence – that required just compensation for the risk.

Harry came out of his trance as he began to consider his next goal.

The passive version of this skill was even more useful. It awakened a kind of sixth sense for dangerous situations related to magic. Harry was looking forward to that. His magic would continually and passively survey the world looking for the dangerous magical things in it. He would never have been captured in that hospital had he possessed this skill first.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

While Harry attended his end-of-the-term meeting with Headmaster Orion Murphy-Black, Bellatrix Lestrange had a team of ten Death Eaters focused on bringing down a few of the wards surrounding Hogwarts.

There was an object inside that massive castle that registered as belonging to her Master. She needed to find it before resurrecting him.

But nothing they threw at the wards got them to budge. Unlike when that fool Dumbledore had been Headmaster, the new regime at Hogwarts had cranked up on security. Those wearing the Dark Mark couldn't pass inside. Period. Plus there were wards in place to stop any kind of dark magic from taking place. In a place with this much ambient magic available, Bellatrix knew that all of her specialties would be worthless.

“We’ll be rendered just like the Aurors. Stunning spells and reductors. Tripping jinxes and tickling charms. Bah! Bring the wards down, gents, bring them down now!”

The eleven of them threw everything they had at the wards, but nothing budged. The wards were weaved together, although Bellatrix’s crew didn’t know that. They all had to come down before some of them would fail.

Their effort was doomed because none of them knew ward-breaking very well. It also didn’t help that they were using inefficient spells to attempt to bring down the wards. It was also a problem that their group was so small. Overwhelming the magic of a place like Hogwarts, which fed its wards with the spells done by hundreds of witches and wizards a year over the course of a thousand years, would require a truly massive army. Or someone with an intricate knowledge of these wards.

“I should have brought Dumbledore...”

With that, she sent Avery off to collect the ancient, decaying wizard. Avery almost had to carry the old husk of a man to where Bellatrix was standing.

“Servant, tell me how to bring down these wards.”

Dumbledore nodded, humbled, and began to observe the wards.

“It is not possible with the numbers of people you have.”

“Tell me how many I need.”

“You would need four hundred above average magical users...”

At the vast number, Bellatrix paled. Even at her Master’s height of power, he had only seventy-four Marked supporters, plus many others who lent intelligence and funding to the cause. It could take years to amass an army of four hundred. Unless...

“Can Dementors be used to drain wards?”

“I do not know,” Dumbledore said in a flat tone of voice.

“But they have effects on emotions and on magical ability, correct?”

“Yes.”

Bellatrix began to plot. She could find enough Dementors, but she’d need her Master back in his body to command the infernal beasts.

“We’re pulling back,” she shouted. “We need more men and more power. We’ll have to resurrect our Lord even without this last bit of his power...”

She, of course, conveniently left out the fact that a piece had disappeared from Ireland and never reappeared. She would ask her Master about it later.

“And, this time, we’ll be sure there is no Harry Potter to interfere...I know of a wizard who never fails in his tasks. It’ll empty out the Lestrage vault to do it, but Harry Potter must die.”

Bellatrix and her crew abandoned their position in the Forbidden Forest just as a team of Ministry Aurors – summoned by the Headmistress after she felt the wards under attack – came into view. She was so caught up in details and planning, she didn’t even think to curse any of them.

Nor did she wonder why it had taken them so very long to show up. She and her team had been pummeling at the wards for close to an hour.

The Ministry of Fools, indeed.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry’s third term found him focused on his books and his studies. He still had tutors for all his subjects, but he was writing no new essays,

merely revising the old ones, trying to cram three years of learning back into the active part of his brain.

He basically had a dedicated bench in one of the Potions laboratories, too, as he attempted to work his way back through the trickier things he'd learned. Chemistry, at his beginning level, was more about theory and mathematics than about conducting a number of experiments. His O-level would be written-only for all the nonmagical sciences. But for his Potions examination, he'd have to brew at least five potions from memory.

He and Victor spent two hour blocks at a time going back through all of their wanded subjects, even the blasted cleaning charms from second year. They transfigured oranges into gorillas and tea cups into wombats, as well.

Harry spent some time with Sirius and Remus, too. Both of them had studied, to some extent, Runes and Warding. Harry allowed them to quiz him endlessly on Celtic, Egyptian, and Norse runes. He had to practice tearing down the runic protections both of them threw up. It was all very good practice and Sirius and Remus were glad to help.

Harry felt under severe stress, but he also liked the fact he was worrying only over exams. If he screwed up, he could always fix it later on. Remembering about Dumbledore and the way things could have gone kept Harry on a fairly even keel.

Harry was, after all, free and happy and alive.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The assassin used the name Blackheart. None of his clients had ever seen his face. None of his targets had ever lived to reveal what they knew of him, either. His services were usually contracted through layers of intermediaries.

He had a certain amount of reputation among dangerous people throughout Europe. It was said he favored deaths that didn't look like assassinations: poisons, arranged accidents, picking fights that resulted in lethal duels.

The meeting Blackheart went to today was different. The contact was from the contracting organization, not the main person, but still from her group.

Blackheart had provided an untraceable portkey which would be activating...now.

The man appeared. Blackheart threw up a few wards around the man to strip him of portkeys, tracking charms, and other pieces of nastiness. The man had had four different sorts of tracers on him. Blackheart smiled inside. People who feared him usually acted predictably.

Stupidly, too.

Blackheart dropped the wards, snagged the man's arm, and performed a forced side-along apparition.

They appeared inside a small room with no doors and no windows. Before his contact had a chance to recover, Blackheart put up anti-apparition wards.

"Let's chat about your manners..."

The Death Eater looked around the room in panic.

"...you arrive using my portkey, but carrying several of your own plus numerous tracking charms. What am I supposed to think? Did you come to kill me, or report on my location, or somehow otherwise betray me? I haven't lasted this long in a dangerous business by being careless. Do you wish to last the rest of this day?"

"I'm sorry," the man haltingly said. "I just did..."

"I want no excuses. The cost, per our agreement, has just gone up. You violated safety protocol. I have half a mind to kill you and walk away..."

The man seemed to blanch even further.

“...but I want the details of the assignment first.”

“A young man, thirteen or fourteen, in Ireland. He’s reliably known to be at only two locations: the Black Estate and the Scoil ar Draocht Glas. He’s high profile...”

“I assume you mean Harry Potter?”

“Yes,” the Death Eater said, exceedingly nervous.

“When you say ‘reliably known’ have you ever seen him elsewhere?”

The Death Eater shook his head. “The temporary leader of my group has only second hand evidence that he was once snatched and kidnapped from Ireland. He disappeared from the kidnapping venue before she arrived. Since then, we’ve had informants in Ireland and no one has reported anything, not from any magical venue.”

Blackheart nodded. His head wasn’t visible from the deep recesses of his hood.

“The mission is possible, but has a low order of total success. I will not try storming the Black Estate under any circumstances...”

“Why?”

“Ask your leader about ‘death wards’... She may not know how to craft them but she’ll be aware they exist. The Black Family created the idea and brought it into reality. I will never knowingly set foot wherever ‘death wards’ have once been raised. It’s one way I stay alive.”

“So you’ll have to storm the Scoil?”

“Perhaps. They use different magic there, but at least it is non-lethal. I will have to consider the method once I’ve done my research...”

“Sir, we can supply you with all we know...”

“You and yours know nothing. I will get the correct information, as it is my life I’m risking in this ridiculous venture...”

“How soon?”

“Months, maybe only two months. But it will take time to arrange. And the cost will be enormous for you.”

“How much?”

“Eight million galleons. Half before I lift a finger; the other half on my successful penetration of the Scoil. I may die in the attempt, but I will promise to enter the Scoil...”

“She will not pay for that sort of result...”

“Then talk to someone else.”

Blackheart sent a spell at the Death Eater and held it while the man screamed. Then he lifted the Cruciatus Curse, stuck an untraceable portkey on the sad little man, and sent him far away.

Blackheart considered what he’d just heard. It was an ugly task.

“They have no other choices. They will meet my price and my conditions, I know it. And I don’t have any good reasons not to take this one. But it won’t be pretty, will it?”

Blackheart felt the beginnings of excitement and fear in his chest. This assignment had potential.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The end of the third term came upon Harry rather quickly. Three weeks of examinations wasn’t something he really looked forward to.

He had two exams in his first day. He found the Charms written exam very straightforward – and he performed especially well on the practical. The International Standard didn’t require several of the Charms Harry had learned, including his Patronus. He impressed his

Australian judge greatly with that and a few other things he'd picked up.

His afternoon was filled with written and oral examinations in French. He would always have an accent, but he was becoming quite proficient, even with the passages from Guy de Maupassant and Victor Hugo he had to translate and answer questions upon.

His second day was uncomfortably full of the 'strange' examinations: Warding, Magical Languages, and the archaeology and anthropology one. Most students had only one test, Philosophy, and used it as a 'rest up' day. Harry had his mind clobbered, but his Warding skills were top-notch.

"You're at or beyond N-level, young sir. Truly excellent work," said the Japanese proctor. Harry wondered if the examiners expected too little from their students, then, or if Sirius was just that good of a tutor in his chosen field.

The testing for his general knowledge of magical languages was written. He did moderately well on it, but completely missed the questions on Mermish. His practical for the parseltongue was rather unique. He was given a snake and told to make it do a number of different things. (There were very few known parselmouths in the world – and none who worked or contracted with the International Testing Authority.)

His third day was an all-day examination in English language and literature, two separate, grueling examinations. Harry wrote six long essays and felt like his hand was going to fall off. Who cared that much about Sir Gawain and the Green Knight – or Romanticism with Wordsworth and Keats?

His fourth day was on Arithmancy and Latin. Harry translated from Ovid, Cicero, Julius Caesar, and Catullus. His fifth day was regular Mathematics. He had the afternoon free. He spent the entire time napping and dreaming of mathematical expression attacking him. It was quite something to be clubbed on the head by a quadratic equation.

He spent the weekend cramming and commiserating with Victor.

“It’s killing me.”

“You and me. It’s getting to both of us.”

The following Monday was full of nonmagical history examinations. Wars and famous leaders; names, places, dates. There was a bit of interesting stuff he got to write about, but for the most part it was a dry exam.

Then came the tests on Politics and Economics on Tuesday. Wednesday was brutal, written and practical transfiguration plus chemistry. Harry did very well on his transfiguration practical, desks into goats, tablecloths into leather cloaks, even showing off a bit of the conjuration he could do.

Thursday was just Potions, written and practical. The six potions he wound up brewing were a mixed bag. Two were very simple; two were of moderate difficulty; one was hard; and one was an unknown potion brewed from supplied instructions. It wound up being devilishly challenging; it was a derivative of the standard magic enhancer used to assist those suffering from extreme magical exhaustion. Harry almost blew his cauldron up three times, but managed to salvage his brew. The examiner, a sour man from Latvia, pronounced it ‘acceptable.’ Considering he’d never tried to make something like that before, Harry thought it a miracle.

Friday featured dueling, written and practical, plus the Study of Other Magical Races. Harry had to duel three times in his first practical: two different varieties of testing dummy, plus go up against one of his examiners. The dummies were used primarily to test if one had adequate knowledge of dueling technique and the ability to use the correct counters to a wide variety of curses, hexes, and jinxes. Here Harry’s transfiguration skills really impressed, as he ensured that simulated Unforgivables were blocked with summoned stones, transfigured bits of this and that, and other interesting techniques. The live duel was designed to see how one moved, how one thought. Harry lasted the required five minutes against the examiner. He walked away unscathed while the examiner had some rather

prominent purple boils sprouting from his arms. Later that afternoon, he had to defend himself in his second practical against a grindylow, plus negotiate with a goblin and feed a thestral and identify the names and features of seven smaller creatures including nifflers and pixies.

"Is it over yet," Harry asked on Saturday.

"No, we're in hell. It never ends there," Victor replied.

The final week began. Runes and German filled his first day. He had only Herbology, written and practical, on Tuesday. He managed to subdue a number of blood thirsty plants and not get strangled by a Devil's Snare. Wednesday featured a completely out of control physics examination. It was set for six hours. Harry's brain almost fell out after doing so many physics problems: acceleration, vectors, electrical capacitance, refraction of light. He had his Thursday off to recover before sitting his History of Magic exam on the final Friday. There were a hundred short answer questions (only six were on goblin rebellions, thank Merlin; there was even one on the formation of the International Quidditch Association), four short essays, and one longer essay selected from among three possible topics. Harry wrote his long essay on the ramifications of the International Statute of Secrecy.

"Did you get enough high marks," Victor asked that night at dinner. "At least four?"

"I hope so. How many tests was that total? It was ridiculous."

"You came here for the education, Harry. I came here because my parents forced me...you know familial pride and such rot. My parents met here. Thought it would give me character."

Harry laughed. "It made you a character..."

The continued saying nonsense and funny lines all night long. Harry even allowed himself an extra scoop of ice cream for pudding. It wasn't much of a celebration, but both young men were mentally wiped out.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

At the moment Harry finished his History of Magic examination, there was a great commotion in an abandoned warehouse in Manchester. Albus Dumbledore had just unwillingly given up a liter of his blood. No one bothered to staunch the flow of the rest. He lay dying on a concrete floor.

At the same time, Bellatrix Lestrange cut off her own hand and it fell into a boiling cauldron. The other Death Eater in the room, Nott, threw in the portion of Dumbledore's blood.

She proceeded through the ritual words.

A bald, gruesome vision of Voldemort stepped out of the cauldron a few minutes later. "Robe me."

He surveyed his birthing chamber and frowned. "Bella, you have done well. But the environment leaves much to desire. Tell me what you've done since I was imprisoned in that stone and you set free from Azkaban..."

The three dark wizards left the warehouse. Voldemort didn't give the weakened, dying Dumbledore a second thought.

But the newly freed Dumbledore – he'd been under the Imperius Curse for a very long time, but had been freed only so he could unwillingly surrender his blood – could only think about Harry Potter.

"The boy doesn't know about the prophesy. He doesn't know what's coming. It will kill us all..."

Those were his last words on Earth. Even in his final moments of clarity, he never thought he'd done anything wrong.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Saturday morning dawned bright for the people of Britain. Little did they know.

Pius Thicknesse and his unnamed colleague from the Department of Mysteries had been busy since they'd been cursed by Bellatrix Lestrange. There were now nineteen Ministry employees under the Imperius. (Pius and the other wizard attacked likely targets, bound them, and took them to Bellatrix or others for the curse.)

Today was the day that all would be revealed. Voldemort was back and he had a statement to make. Unfortunately, as it would turn out, Bellatrix had planned all of this for him in his absence. She did not have a chance to brief him before the plan went into effect – or at least that was what she told herself. Truth be known, she didn't want anyone to stop it. Stupid wizards and witches should die, after all.

Thicknesse waited at the elevators for his usual responsibility to show up. Minister Ogden usually arrived about now. Instead of flooring directly into his office, he preferred to be seen by other members of the Ministry. He had a better head on his shoulders than the late Fudge or that woman Vibrius who'd lasted not even two years.

Thicknesse sent off a messaging spell as soon as he saw Ogden enter the building. A minute later, the Death Eater running this operation from outside the Ministry building had messaging spells off to every other Imperiused individual in the building. The project was to start in two minutes.

"Morning, Minister."

"Morning, Pius."

Ogden went into the elevator, followed by his Auror escort. The people who'd followed him from his home into the Ministry went off to their other duties. The Minister was always protected these days.

The Minister stepped off the elevator at the top floor and promptly hustled off to his office at the end of the thickly carpeted hall. Pius walked to the security station, received a messaging spell, and then activated a Ministry-wide lockdown. It was only eight ten in the morning. The building was less than a fifth full. But it was enough.

“Minister. Lock yourself in your office. I just received a verified threat. Dark wizards have launched an attack on the atrium.”

Minister Ogden began to run down the hall. His enormous girth wasn't well obscured by his robes. Pius could feel the man's thudding steps as he attempted to run.

Throughout the building, all the other thralls were performing similar work. They were 'securing' people in the rooms where they'd be mostly likely to perish in the real attack. The 'Death Eaters' downstairs were Imperiused Aurors wearing the correct black robes.

Pius knew he was about to die. He knew it, but he couldn't fight the curse. He'd been a Ravenclaw, but in the bottom third of his class. He wanted to be smart and intellectual, but he didn't possess the talents for it. Likewise, he wanted to be free of the curse trapping him inside a tiny corner of his mind – but he couldn't.

Ten seconds.

The Minister was 'safely' inside his office.

Seven seconds.

The fool didn't realize that his filing cabinet had been replaced by a box containing forty gallons of liquid explosive.

Two seconds.

“Good bye.”

The entire Ministry – sealed shut as tightly as it could be – rattled with the dozen explosions encompassing every floor, every department. The Minister and his bodyguard died. The paperpushers in Magical Creatures and Games and Sports were all wiped out. A handful of Aurors just coming on duty died, as did twelve Unspeakables who'd been on the overnight shift. Every curiosity or mystery inside the Department of Mysteries was destroyed, even the mysterious Veil. The Imperiused fools who worked in the Ministry had arranged for the very largest bomb to be inside the Department of Mysteries.

The rescue efforts were hampered as the Muggle building directly over the Ministry collapsed as well from the underground explosions. Four hundred seven accountants, secretaries, and bankers died, in addition to one hundred eight three Ministry workers. Seven department heads lost their lives. Three small departments within the Ministry were entirely wiped out.

It was a bad day for Britain.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

In Ireland, it was an overcast day. However, Harry Potter didn't know that. He still hadn't come out of the just unsealed Scoil caverns. No, he'd been out flying with Victor. He, Sirius, and Remus were leaving for the Black Estate later that afternoon.

"That was better than sitting for a test," Victor joked.

"Getting poked in the eye with a wooden spoon is better than a test."

"I just can't believe how much fun flying is. When my Dad and older brother taught me, I didn't like it at all. But...the Flying Team and you made it interesting."

"I only learned here, Vic, but I've loved being on a broom from the first moment."

Harry was following behind Vic while they continued their chat. They wanted to put their brooms away before heading off for breakfast.

Then, suddenly, Harry felt something odd. An uneasy feeling wash down his body. It was his passive magic sensing capability...

"Vic, down." He pushed at his friend. Then he dived to the floor. A nasty purple curse flew over his head.

Harry withdrew his wand and began cursing behind him.

"Vic, get in a room. Seal the door. Sound the Scoil alarm."

Harry sent enough spells back to keep his unknown opponent from attacking Vic. His friend got safely into a dueling chamber and Harry heard the door seal. Once Vic sounded the Scoil alarm, the door would seal against all attempts to enter or leave – until the alarm was lifted by the Headmaster. It was an old precaution from when leprechauns, decades earlier, had returned to the caverns and attempted to forcibly evict the Scoil and its students.

Harry scrambled to a new protected spot. More spells flew his way. They collided into the corner of a wall. Harry was safe for the moment. But who was attacking him with such lethal spells...and why?

His passive sense didn't let up. This person, whoever he was, wasn't leaving. Harry had to do something.

Harry then moved his head and ducked just as a Fire Whip came around the corner of the wall and attempted to decapitate him. He was back on his feet and running. Harry Potter knew he was in for the fight of his life.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter's Fourth Year

A/N: The last chapter proved to me how much more interesting Bellatrix could have been as the main villain in Harry Potter than Voldemort (he's more of a schemer, she seems more of a 'let's get it done' type of gal). Let's see what kind of mayhem I can cook up for her in this (the final) chapter. A brief epilogue at the end.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry ran down the hall as fast as he could. He knew the person behind him was thoroughly trained in lethal spells. That fire whip proved it – and it had only been inches from mortally injuring Harry.

He was trying to sketch out some sort of plan as he ran. The Scoil was in lock down, so that would help reduce the number of bystanders or potential hostages for the assassin to use. Harry could duck into an empty room. The door would seal behind him. He'd be safe, like Victor now was.

Tempting.

He consider and then rejected it. Harry had to deal with this. He couldn't put it off. He couldn't delegate this unwanted responsibility.

He needed to capture the assassin or disable him somehow. Who knew how long it would take for Aurors or others to come to aid him?

At the same time, he knew he couldn't go head-to-head against an adult, highly trained wizard. Harry would be left in ribbons on the bloody floor. This person wasn't like Dumbledore: he didn't waste time blathering on and on. His first action had been that nasty purple spell...before he switched to that horrifying fire whip.

Harry pulled his wand and wordlessly cast silencing charms on himself. Then he pointed his wand and conjured three small pieces of stone to appear in the hallway he had just skipped past. Gravity would do the rest from there after the stones appeared in midair. Perhaps that little sound diversion would buy him a few more

seconds to plan. A first diversion in what would probably be a war of diversions.

Harry ran and attempted to plan.

First. What were his assets? What could he rely upon?

He knew the school...but it was possible his attacker did as well. Obviously he had managed to get inside. Was he a master's candidate here? Was he an outsider?

He was a metamorphmagus...but he couldn't exactly change his appearance and disappear among a horde of other people, the Scoil alarm had seen to that. In any case, Harry wouldn't have wanted to endanger others just to save himself.

He knew some illegal wards...but perhaps the person momentarily distracted behind him had been trained as a cursebreaker.

He could lay some traps, so simple they were obvious but irresistible...but he was counting on an assassin to act in the way Harry expected. Who said an assassin had to be logical?

Second. What were his liabilities? His training from his Dueling and Combat course was so ingrained that he thought this way almost instantaneously now.

Unknown assassin.

Unknown accomplices...someone helped him or her into the school.

Unknown fighting style(s).

Unknown abilities, weapons, tactics...unknown everything.

Merlin, what could he do? He had no plan. Running, hiding, and planning wasn't itself a plan.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Voldemort entered the temporary headquarters established by Bellatrix Lestrange.

“Why are you grinning like a loon?”

“Master, our attack on the Ministry was a complete success...”

His snake-like face narrowed in confusion. “What attack?” His words were precise and cold.

“The attack to celebrate your resurrection, Master. The building was destroyed. We estimate nearly two hundred blood traitors perished...”

Voldemort had his wand out in seconds. “Crucio!”

“Why wasn’t I told of this? I would have stopped it. Stooges under the Imperius have much greater value than destroying the Ministry – we would have ruled it from the shadows, Bellatrix. The fools in the wider world would have known the truth and never spoken of it, cowards that they are. They deserve utter enslavement for being as dull witted as they are. However, your attack had made it clear to all and sundry what happened. You gave away our advantage, Bellatrix. Even the Muggle government will know.... What were you thinking?”

Voldemort stopped screaming and released Bellatrix from the spell.

“Master, they were not fit to...”

“No, Bella, you were not fit to withhold this information from me. Now you will tell me everything. Our longest term plans are ruined. It would have been easiest to put a puppet in the Minister’s office and rule from there. The Wizengamot would have done what I wanted; it was filled with the oldest of the pureblood families in any case. But you ruined this ready-made scenario. We will have to try entirely different things to accomplish our goals. You gave away our advantage of surprise and stealth...”

Bellatrix bowed in resignation. But inside...inside she knew she was right. She told Voldemort much of what she had done, but not all of it. She decided to keep her master’s recovered trinkets to herself. The

pretty Slytherin locket, the large stone ring, the chalice: Bellatrix held them all now. She'd already obliviated the others of the knowledge. Her cruel Master gone to great lengths to hide them, so they were obviously important to him. But she wasn't telling all of her secrets to a man who rewarded her with the Cruciatus Curse. No.

"Yes, Master. I understand. I will start from the plot's inception..."

She had always been his most faithful servant. She deserved to be treated with respect. She told the half man-half creature what he desired to know, but she seethed.

No one tortured Bellatrix Lestrange with impunity...not even her Master.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The Irish Ministry of Magic was the first magical government to learn what had happened in London.

Brigid Daly wiped the tears from her eyes as soon as she learned that one of her friends in the legation had died in the explosion.

She prepared herself to brief her superiors. Alan had been inside the Ministry in the Department of International Magical Cooperation. The British were apparently trying to resurrect an old tradition called the Triwizard Tournament...and they wanted Ireland and the Scoil to be involved somehow.

Brigid Daly, the head of the Irish legation in London, apparated to Dublin as soon as she collected the basic facts of the situation. She'd even walked by the disaster site. She walked into the emergency meeting with the Minister and relevant department heads.

The Minister was a rather stern wizard who'd held the post for seven years. He knew what he was about. He didn't even wait for Brigid to sit down before he lobbed his first question. "Do we know who did this?"

Ambassador Daly shook her head. "The place is in ruins, even the Muggle building above it collapsed. It's a nightmare... Witches and wizards need to investigate and keep the muggles out of the ten levels below the building they're investigating."

"Will this bring the British wizarding world into the open?"

Daly shrugged. "Most of their Aurors and Law Enforcement hierarchy seem to have survived. It's possible they'll get this contained..."

The Minister turned to look at his Head of Intelligence and Analysis. "Any clues from what you've heard?"

"We've had monitors in Britain for a while now. There was a powerful ritual of some sort near Manchester last night. Then this thing in London ninety minutes ago. The monitors put Bellatrix Lestrange at the ritual last night and unknown signatures at the disaster in London..."

The Minister asked questions of everyone else in the room, brief, to-the-point questions. Finally he sighed.

"Ambassador Daly, you'll return to London, close the Embassy, and return to Dublin for the time being. I'm not leaving our people in place to get hurt when the British don't even have a functioning government to deal with the situation... I'll instruct the Foreign Secretary to put out the word to the other magical governments. I will personally contact the Muggle Prime Minister and pass this information along."

The spymaster pushed his body forward. "If I might, sir, perhaps we should erect the international portkey diversion barriers..."

"We've never done that, not as long as there's been a magical government here..." The Head of Aurors was turning purple with shock at the proposal.

The spymaster raised his hands. "I'm not saying 'bounce them back.' I'm saying direct all international portkeys to secure facilities for the time being. Britain has a band of terrorists that just destroyed their

magical government. They have operated in our country, too, in recent memory. I don't want this spilling over here..."

"It's a terrible precedent..."

"It's better than us having this next meeting where all of us are in our funerary attire, Ainsley, where we're all the honoured dead being put into the ground."

The Minister was silent for a few moments. "Erect the wards. Staff a center with Aurors round the clock. Everyone using an international portkey, even Ministry officials, gets deposited there. Close off any but the official International Floo points, as well, and make sure those are staffed. And get the Magical Detection Office focused on apparition coming from offshore. And someone look into tracking brooms..."

The conversation went on for a long time. It eventually expanded to having trackers placed on those who arrived in Ireland via Muggle means of transport as well. They were protecting their future.

The meeting ended abruptly when a security officer entered the conference room to tell the Head of Aurors the following: "The Scoil alarm has sounded. Someone has penetrated their defenses."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Blackheart was very surprised, unpleasantly so, that his first attack had failed. Then all of his other spells failed to connect. Then that blasted Potter managed to get his friend to safety.

Blackheart heard the locks echo through the Scoil. He didn't have time to retrieve Potter's friend. The officials would be warned by now. The whole operation was turning rotten.

The longer he stayed in this building the greater the chance of failure. This was already the riskiest single contract he'd ever taken. Staying here past five minutes would almost ensure failure. The Irish would send their best. The teachers would eventually begin hunting him. Perhaps even the Potter brat would get lucky.

He unleashed his fire whip and aimed it where Potter had disappeared. It sailed through the air and only connected with stone. The boy was smart. He kept moving. Moving meant life, meant safety. The boy was cleverer than anyone had known, it seemed, even Blackheart.

Blackheart had studied the boy up close. He'd even used these last months to fully dredge out everything known about Harry Potter. Protected as he was normally by the Scoil, the public record was thin. But Blackheart had probed former students, especially the useful Colin Matthews, who was now dead. (Blackheart preferred permanent measures instead of Memory Charms, as they could be broken in many cases.)

Colin's memories had shown how Harry dueled, how he reacted to attacks, how he lost control of his accidental magic... All interesting, but useless information in the present situation.

Blackheart threw all of his knowledge out the window. He had lost his advantage of surprise.

He began to run after the boy. He had to kill his quarry very soon. The boy was a good hallway ahead of him by now. Blackheart moved only by listening. The sound...suddenly disappeared. Then a shifting of rocks over there. Blackheart ran after them. He ran. Then he stopped to listen. He heard nothing. No movement, no breathing, nothing.

"Good work, boy."

Even Blackheart could hand out praise when it was deserved.

He began retracing his steps. He quickly examined each open room he passed and sealed them. He tested out all the doors to see if any of them weren't truly sealed.

He figured Potter had by now sealed himself away...made himself impervious to assault.

He sighed and kicked at the floor. And saw a few odd looking stones. They didn't match anything in the Scoil. They had just been made. Just been created as a distraction...and Blackheart fell for it.

He started running again.

He saw the intersection of hallways ahead. That was where he'd turned aside and gone off on his tangent. Clever, boy. Very clever.

Potter had bought himself time. Was it worth it? Was it enough?

Blackheart ran down the hall. He had to catch up. He didn't have that long left before he'd need to retreat or hide himself. Blackheart ran down a hallway without thinking. He just ran through a magical trigger. He stopped when he felt the wash of a powerful ward spring into place behind him.

"Shit."

He could feel the ward. Behind him. He pivoted in fear. The thing was really strong and ominous. He cast a couple of diagnostics before cursing himself for this foolhardy plan of his. His attacks failed, he fell for a diversion, and then he walked for a trap.

He could have done this a different way. He could have waited for Potter to leave the Scoil...he could have been left waiting for years and unable to meet the tight deadline of his contract.

He sighed. It was true. This had been his best chance of a high risk, high reward situation. It looked grim now.

Then it got worse. His jaw dropped as the ward analysis flared back with an answer.

For Blackheart was now in an impossible risk, high reward situation.

He stared at what appeared to be a 'death ward' of some variety raised between him and his means of escape. He had faced a lesser construct than a 'death ward' only once in his life and had a mortal fear of them, stronger even than his fear of enraged sphinxes.

He recognized he was trapped in this hallway and the four classrooms down here.

“How did Potter do this? Who would teach a child such a vile creation as a ‘death ward’?”

He was reeling in the unpleasant facts. Was Potter in here? Or was this a prison or holding cell?

Blackheart wasn't going to sit still for this. He would go down only after he killed a dozen people. He examined the hallway closely. It was decorated in a martial fashion. There was a stone statue in a fighter's pose and two suits of armor. A few tapestries with battle scenes. No where to hide.

He checked the doors in this hallway. Three of them were thoroughly secured. He could crack the wards, but it would greatly weaken him to do so. He approached the partially opened fourth door with a good deal of caution.

His lack of caution earlier had trapped him inside this hallway. He didn't want to be further confined if he could help it.

He cast a dozen detection spells before he even touched the door to push it open. The door was clean. He reached forward and pushed the door. It creaked lightly as it opened onto a dueling chamber.

He cast more spells to determine what might be hiding in the room. He got a positive signal that there was a magical being of some sort behind a door at the edge of the room.

Blackheart thought for a second about his options. He was trapped. He would be caught. But he could take Harry Potter with him. If one must die on assignment, one should achieve the objective first.

Blackheart pointed his wand at the door he'd just tested and applied a ward-resistance charm to it. He pulled the door shut and then opened it quietly. It still made some creaking noises. But it hadn't sealed. If he went into this room, he could come out again. Perhaps, just perhaps,

he'd have time to take care of the hiding Harry Potter and then see what could be done about that 'death ward.'

He moved with silent feet inside the dueling chamber. He walked halfway across the room and decided on his attack. The boy had to be hiding in that closet. Wasn't it stupid of him not to have shut the room's door behind him? It would have sealed, giving him a fair amount of protection. It would be his last mistake.

Blackheart cast his most powerful explosive curse at the wooden closet door. The solid piece of wood instantly turned into thousands of tiny, flying knives. If the Potter brat had been inside the closet, he was now dead.

Blackheart walked over to the site of his victory. He wanted to know his target was truly dead.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The British Prime Minister walked into his office after getting pulled from an urgent meeting. He didn't like talking to his counterpart in Ireland very often as they shared the same first name. It made conversations a bit strange.

"John, how may I help you?" His tone was brusque. He had a crisis to manage out in the other room. But when a fellow head of government calls and says it's an emergency, one pays attention.

"Mr. Prime Minister, I think I can help you..." The formal tone was a polite rebuke to the flippant British PM.

"If you know why I had a building blow up in downtown London, I'd be glad to hear it."

"Yes, John. That's exactly why I'm calling."

"What!"

"I just had an emergency meeting of sorts with those special types..."

“Oh, you have those magical folks, too, in Ireland?”

“Yes. They just told me that the British Ministry of Magic had been destroyed...”

The phone line was silent for a good few seconds.

“Why wasn’t I told? It happened here, in my country...”

“Probably because your Minister of Magic is dead. It was a bloody, deadly attack...”

The British Prime Minister was quiet again as he tried to remember the things he’d been told over the last few years.

“I’ve heard a bit about their wars. Some of them up to no good again?”

“Sounds like it’s exactly the same group acting up again, John.”

“I’ll have to call in some special advisers then. Got some squids working in MI6, you know...”

“I think you mean squibs...and, yes, I did know.” The Irish Prime Minister was laughing.

“Bloody security service you have. Thank you again, Mr. Prime Minister, for the notification. I’ll not forget the service you’ve done me today.”

“Terrorists are terrorists, whether they be like us or those other folks. Got to keep a firm hand with them.”

“Exactly, John, exactly. Pass along my greetings, will you?”

The line went silent. John Major, Prime Minister, then asked his secretary to clear his day. He needed to visit MI6.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Orion Murphy-Black had never felt the true Scoil alarm activated before. Sure they tested it once per year so that all the students were aware of it. It made no sound, but it did register as a repeating ping inside each student and teacher's mind within the Scoil. Orion ran to his office to consult with his instruments. He had two designed to tell him exactly what was happening, who had activated the alarm, and where.

When Orion consulted his trinkets, he didn't know what to do. It looked like a real attack. There had been lethal spells used in the first floor corridor. Victor O'Neil had activated the alarm and was currently sealed in a room.

Orion stepped to his Floo. "Auror Office."

When a head popped into view, Orion began talking. "I have someone in the Scoil casting offensive magic like crazy. The Scoil is in lockdown after a student triggered the alarm..."

The unnamed Auror looked stunned but stayed professional. "We'll send a team. Keep your students and faculty safe, sir."

Orion pulled his head from the fireplace. "I don't know how. This attacker is already trying to kill one of my students... Is there anything I can do to help?"

He got up, threw away the logic of the situation, and ran out of his office and headed to the first floor. He hoped he wouldn't be too late. He hoped he could at least be of some help to whoever was in need.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The cloaked killer walked past Harry, not even sparing him a second glance. Harry's entire plan hinged on the man being terrified by the 'faux black ward' that Sirius had taught him. It would stun a person – and its magical signature resembled one of the famed Black Family 'death wards' – so it was perfect for any situation with a potentially experienced cursebreaker. People into grave robbing knew how to preserve their own necks.

It seemed this killer did as well.

So Harry stood very still. He watched the man move cautiously and slowly. He watched the killer cast detection spells of every sort. The killer never noticed his prey. Hiding in plain sight was the best solution, wasn't it?

Harry had conjured a bit of sandstone and used his metamorphic abilities to give his hair and skin the correct color. Sure, he'd had to vanish most of his own clothing and use a color spell on his underwear, but he looked like an old statue in a rarely used corridor, didn't he?

Harry breathed as slowly and shallowly as he could manage with all the nervous energy flowing through him. It wasn't easy to be fifteen feet away from a killer.

The man eventually walked inside the trap. He'd scanned at the doorway and then gone inside quietly but intent on something.

Harry listened as a massive explosion ripped through the opened room. What was the killer attacking?

Harry stepped off his conjured pedestal and stepped to the doorway. The cloaked assassin was standing in front of where they kept the dueling dummies... Had he attacked them thinking they were Harry?

The young man was confused for a moment. Sure, they were the Gilderoy Lockhart Dueling Dummies, "each equipped with a hair from Gilderoy's perfect head" (according to the faded advertisements still woven into the dummies' cloaks). Was a single hair on a dueling dummy enough to trip a magical detection spell? Apparently so.

Harry stifled a laugh at the fierce killer probing and prodding the ruined remains of a life-sized Gilderoy Lockhart dummy. Harry decided it was time to act.

He pointed his wand into the room and wordlessly cast the 'Serpensortia' spell four times. The snakes moved quietly and quickly

through the room. As they were about on top of the killer, Harry conjured his Grim-like patronus. The silver beast flew through the air.

The attacker saw the silver energy and tried to cast spells at the terrifying-looking spectre. His snakes used the moment to attack. Three managed to strike the man in some part of his body. Instead of just falling to the ground, screaming, he twisted around looking for his prey.

Harry knew the man was dedicated to his work.

He didn't stop the silent incantation he was performing while his patronus and snakes were doing their worst. After thirty seconds, the vile-seeming 'black ward' flickered into view in the center of the room.

It wasn't a strong ward, as it was only the result of Harry's magic and had no powerful rune stones to tether and strengthen it. It had taken thirty seconds to create and would only last for three hours. It was enough time. It was just strong enough. The ward itself wasn't keeping the man trapped, but rather the man's fear of what the ward might be.

Harry stepped into the safe side of the room from his vantage point at the door.

Harry's patronus began to fade from view. The killer managed to destroy the last of the conjured snakes. Then he looked around his new prison.

He whispered in horror. The words sounded like "Another death ward."

His mouth didn't move as the killer unleashed a half dozen spells right at Harry. All of them were sickly green in appearance: the Killing Curse.

None of them made it through what Harry called the 'faux black ward'. The light black previously displayed by the ward became several shades darker. The curses had just made the frail ward quite strong... Ironical.

Wards were beautiful, poorly understood things, Harry knew. Magical theory was correct that nothing labeled as a shield could withstand the Killing Curse. But shields were arbitrarily described as defensive spells that took less than six seconds to cast.

There were several varieties of defensive wards that could block every type of magic. Because of their power, many of them were considered to be forms of Dark Magic. However, Harry didn't care.

The 'faux black ward' he'd used twice this day was a comparatively simple, but obscure ward (some of the more complicated of the Black Family's true 'death wards' required days of rune carving and hours of casting time), and was powerful enough in almost every case to stop a witch or wizard cold. It took on a faint black aura and proceeded to absorb any magic that passed near it, including the magic contained within the bodies of witches and wizards. Such a quickly created ward wouldn't kill, but it would incapacitate anyone trying to pass through it (where true 'death wards' drained a wizard's power so quickly and viciously that it killed him).

By the perturbed stare on the killer's face, the man was now convinced he was held by a 'death ward.' After all, the thing had just absorbed six killing curses.

He pivoted and look to the wall that was likely an outer wall of the Scoil. He began casting battering and explosion curses at the stone work. His mission had failed. He was now trying to escape.

Harry tried to start a conversation with the killer. He started with the obvious. "It's a dueling chamber. It's warded against misaimed spells. The floor and ceiling are, as well."

The killer didn't let up in his barrage. He attacked everything in the room. Only the wooden doors to the storage areas gave way under the assault. All of the stone surfaces came away completely unscathed.

The killer even sent another dozen at the black ward separating him from Harry Potter. They were absorbed. Every spell the man sent at the black ward actually strengthened it.

“You know, it will probably last for nine or ten hours now...because I’m not taking it down sooner.”

The cloaked man didn’t care. He kept twisting and turning, trying to find some sort of vulnerability.

“These bizarre pieces of wizardry can’t be defeated by brute force. The only times the famed Black Family ‘death wards’ failed were when traitors betrayed the Family from inside the structure under siege.” Such a history had, of course, only increased the famed Black Family paranoia.

The killer kept attacking. He was using powerful spells at full intensity. He was caught but refused to acknowledge his situation.

“We have all the time in the world,” Harry said. “No one will be able to pass through the first wards I set at the hallway entrance. And you won’t be able to get through this ward. Attack way.”

The man continued casting. His wandwork was exceptional, so Harry was almost glad to sit back and watch for a while. He was still in a bit of shock so he didn’t really tie together the fact he was calmly observing and learning from a man who’d just tried to kill him.

Harry watched as the man began to tire. With the volume and strength of the magic he’d been using, it wasn’t terribly surprising. The killer finally slumped to the floor in defeated resignation.

“You’re stronger than I had expected,” the killer finally said.

“I’m glad,” Harry responded. “I rather like my life as it is.”

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Orion Murphy-Black arrived at the lesser used of the two dueling corridors. He saw the kind of ward that was in place and knew not to get anywhere near the crazy thing.

He'd gotten the house elves to do a check on everyone in the school. Seventeen had come back unaccounted for. Sixteen of them had already signed out for the vacation. Only Harry Potter hadn't been found.

Orion wondered if Harry had cast this monstrosity or if the attacker had done it... There was nothing he could do right now, but wait...and hope...and think.

If Harry had done this, perhaps the boy had a plan. It was possible, but not likely, Harry was still alive.

If the attacker had done this, then he'd have to dismantle the ward before attempting to escape. Orion settled into position and cast a notice-me-not charm on himself. He'd be ready to take some vengeance for his student and his invaded Scoil.

He wondered if the Aurors would arrive in time to see anything happen.

He wondered if he'd survive long enough to discover why this had happened – and who was behind it.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Blackheart considered his narrow menu of options. He had an exhausted body, a functioning wand, and not much else. What could he do? Wait for Irish Aurors? No. That would never do.

He could negotiate his way free from the boy... But this particular incarnation of Harry Potter seemed smarter than he'd expected.

Shock and awe? He could reveal his true self...throw the boy off that way.

He wouldn't give up, not until every option was exhausted.

“You’re stronger than I had expected.”

“I’m glad. I rather like my life as it is.”

It wasn’t the kind of rejoinder he’d expected. Next attempt.

“That ward is illegal.”

“I don’t really care. Someone shooting killing curses at me is a criminal.”

The boy wasn’t falling to pieces.

“It’s funny the way our choices can come back to hurt us, Potter.”

“I can see that.”

Fine, enough with the subtlety. Next plan: the truth.

“I chose to teach you, you know. It seems, from your sandstone-colored skin, you’ve used my lessons against me. I never thought you’d actually learn the things I taught...”

“I don’t take classes from murderers.”

“You did from me, Harry.”

The man pulled down the hood of his cloak. His face was completely white with only eyes and a mouth. He had no hair, no ears, no nose. Nothing.

“My work attire is not very pleasing, I apologize. Let me show you something more...recognizable.”

He adapted his face. It changed into a form Harry Potter would have to acknowledge.

“You called me Aleksandr Dobrydin. I was the metamorphmagus who taught you the beginning steps of a meditative cycle, a cycle useful

for mastering the mind arts and eventually even highly refined wandless magic...”

Harry didn't let his surprise show. But he had been surprised.

“You. Sirius asked you if you were an Unspeakable...”

“I work for no government on a formal basis. Highest bidder only.”

“Who hired you?”

The man just smiled.

“Dumbledore?”

Blackheart would never have worked for that man. “Never met the man.”

“Some of the Death Eaters?”

Blackheart just smiled. It was as good as a yes.

Harry nodded. He understood. “How did you get in?”

“The place is only locked down during term. In between, anyone with an appointment can visit, even a lowly master's candidate from outside Dublin. I sent a letter and got a portkey in return. Simplest thing to set up...”

“The execution, so to speak, was harder,” Harry said.

The killer was quiet. The boy had a vicious, truth-telling tongue.

“Why would a contract killer tutor a kid like me?”

“I have to keep up my many legitimate identities to protect the name of Blackheart. The woman who asked me to tutor you wasn't someone I could easily turn down, not without consequences.”

“Sirius said you told him to make sure I learned this. Why did you doubt my abilities by attacking me like this?”

“When I said it took years to learn the meditative cycle, I meant ten years. Very few ever get to that point; lack of patience, you understand. In fact, very few metamorphmagi get beyond mastering the seventh or eighth step. You seem to have developed a passive detector of dangerous magic?”

Harry just nodded.

“It’s my mistake, then. Not for telling you the exercises, but for thinking you only a lucky child. I do not expect I’ll be given the chance to make a similar mistake again...”

“I hope not.”

“I don’t suppose you care to help out an old teacher?”

“I think any debts I might have owed you ended when you tried to kill me, yeah?”

The room fell silent. He’d asked the question. The denial hadn’t been unexpected from this particular Harry Potter. A smarter Harry than he’d expected, more talented than he’d guessed.

“How far have you progressed?”

“I’m stumped on finding my animagus forms so far, but at least I’m sure there’s more than one. The rest is coming along nicely. I’ve started working on a wandless levitation charm. Perhaps a few more weeks for that...”

“It’s remarkable progress. You’ll be able to take over for Blackheart in a few years if you keep it up...”

“Blackheart. I’ve never heard of your alter ego before.”

“Best to keep things exclusive, I think. Only the people with the money and the need for my services should ever hear of Blackheart.”

“Do a lot of metamorphs end up in your line of work?”

He nodded. “Some for governments, some independently. Even the ones in law enforcement sometimes moonlight. It’s too good an opportunity...”

“I’ll pass.”

“Before I let the Aurors in, would you care to really tell me why you trained me? You could have fed me lies instead of things that worked...”

Blackheart smiled for the last time. The boy really was smarter than he’d known.

“The most powerful magics are never committed to the page, Harry; they’re always taught from one to another; that’s why so much of the best magic is lost and rarely rediscovered.”

“The spells in spellbooks?”

“Worthless trash. Things that everyone knows are things that everyone can block. Your ‘black wards’ are proof of that. Mostly they’re rumors through history, with a handful of people able to use them, but when used – well, I found out I couldn’t bring them down. It’s privileged knowledge and powerful for that fact...”

“Lumos was created by Merlin, they say, and you call it worthless?”
The boy wasn’t angry...he was curious.

“Merlin’s legend rests on scraps and fragments of the things he’s supposed to have done; no one has his journals or his private spellbooks. They never existed; the best never let their secrets out like that. Who knows what Merlin really did or didn’t do...none of those he trained personally left much information behind.

“That said, remember to teach some of what you know to those worthy to learn it, no matter whether you might be fashioning yourself

an opponent for the future. It's your obligation to magic. That's the only way to live."

Harry just nodded. He stood up, his body returned to its natural colors, and he flicked his wand to conjure himself a temporary black robe. He dressed and walked out of the room.

Blackheart heard the wards fall outside and then he heard a loud commotion as people began trying to run down the short hallway. Two teachers or administrators practically flew into the room looking angry enough to kill.

To kill. What a simple job. What a lovely life.

The downside, of course, was just this situation. Blackheart had sworn years earlier never to be caught. Never to be caught alive. It was too late now, far past the point of repair.

He turned his wand on himself. As he saw the first Auror enter the dueling chamber, Blackheart said, "Avada Kedavra."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The Irish Minister of Magic was back in another meeting. It was a very long day.

"Ambassador Daly, Foreign Minister Collins, what's the news?"

The Foreign Minister began to speak, "The British Ministry of Magic created a number of enemies within the international community in the last few decades, especially with its poor handling of the Voldemort situation in the 1970s and early 1980s. It never really tried to repair its tattered reputation, especially with that asshole Bartemius Crouch as its Head of International Magical Cooperation."

The Minister of Magic just smirked. "You never wanted to make up. You hated your British counterpart..."

Ambassador Daly, reassigned to general liaison work, interrupted the distraction. "Sir, the consensus opinion worldwide seems to have settled on 'let the snobs deal with the problem, they created it.'"

The Minister was trying to settle on his own policy.

"It would be a different situation had another country been attacked. Had Turkey been attacked like that, we would offer assistance. Had it been Egypt or Spain, we'd have had temporary Aurors loaned to them within hours.

"But, it wasn't any of those countries. It was Britain."

The Minister turned to look around the room. It seemed Ambassador Daly had more to say. He needed in her direction.

She pulled up a small sheaf of papers. "The Irish Ministry of Magic did earliest (and most non-judgmental) work disseminating the truth of what had happened in Britain. Within three hours of the British Ministry building's destruction, France, Spain, and Belgium activated their magical travel barriers. None of them offered assistance of any sort to the British. Privately the French Minister told me he hoped that Crouch had died.

"Within six hours, Germany, Switzerland, Portugal, and Denmark erected their own protections. The Germans sent in a few Unspeakables to assess the situation, but they also pulled out their formal diplomatic corps.

"As for the bureaucratic nightmare known as the American Ministry of Magic, we don't expect them to get anything accomplished until tomorrow. Knowing them, it may take them a week to recall their diplomats.

"In short, the world has abandoned Britain because Britain abandoned everyone else. It lied about the innocence of these free Death Eaters, it broke agreements on fixing the conditions of its wizarding prison, and then it crumbled under a single attack..."

The Minister nodded. The evidence was rather unidirectional. No one planned to offer aid to Britain.

The Minister finally decided. "While it seems that Britain is in a sticky place, to the people still living inside its borders the loss of the Ministry means little, aside from the pain of all the deaths and the sheer level of fear it created. No one will actually miss the 'services' it alleged provides. We can only hope that they will deal with their prisoners somehow..."

Ambassador Daly nodded. She agreed with leaving the British to fend for themselves. "It will wake a lot of people up. Too bad it'll take them a good long while to organize enough to talk with each other. I hope they learn fast."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry woke up the morning after all the excitement was over. He'd been interviewed by Aurors and every other sort of government bureaucrat for hours...on what he'd observed of Blackheart, on how he knew to cast such wards, on how he'd trapped a vicious assassin.

"Youth and cunning can win out over experience and arrogance, you know," had been a common remark Harry had said. He hadn't given up his tricks.

After it was over, the Scoil's Healer had stuffed Harry full of a sleeping potion.

Now he had the hardest parts to deal with. Harry saw Orion Murphy-Black, Sirius Black, and Remus Lupin sitting in the hospital wing looking at him.

"This won't be pleasant?"

"Well, none of us will try to kill you, Harry," Sirius said.

"Small comfort."

"Why," was all Remus said.

“Why? Why try to lead him away from everyone else?”

Remus nodded. Sirius and Orion seemed interested as well.

“Because I couldn’t pawn that off on someone else. I could have locked myself in a room – like the one I pushed Victor into...he’s alright, isn’t he?”

Orion Murphy-Black said, “Yes. He’s still at the Scoil and wants to make sure you’re okay...”

“Well, I couldn’t let someone like Victor get hurt just because this psychopath was flinging spells at me. So, I used what I had available. I knew I’d never be able to defeat a fully grown wizard, but I could trick one, couldn’t I?”

Sirius was bursting with nervous, emotional energy. “Kidnapped. Stalked by an assassin. Harry, do you ever have a normal year? Why do you have to run toward danger?”

“I had nothing to do with organizing the kidnapping. As for the crazy guy yesterday, he came after me. I just led him away from everyone else...”

The conversation lasted a long time. The Headmaster was terrified of ‘death wards’ in his school. Remus tore into the Headmaster for the security breach that allowed an assassin, under the guise of a prospective master’s candidate, to enter the Scoil. Sirius alternated between pride and fear for his godson.

Harry tried to listen to everyone. He tried to keep his patience. But...it just wasn’t possible.

“Here it is. It’s okay for me to risk my life...but I can’t willingly risk someone else’s without them knowing it. I could have hidden and left that nutcase to do whatever he was going to do, but I didn’t. I couldn’t.”

No one agreed with Harry, but eventually his stomach won the argument. It grumbled and the two hours of conversation, accusations, recriminations, and attempts to get Harry to promise 'never to be so foolishly brave, and stupid, ever again.'

A large breakfast helped to quiet and calm all of them. When the conversation resumed it was a touch more rational.

"The first thing we'll do," Headmaster Murphy-Black said, "is have all candidate meetings outside of the Scoil. They'll last longer than an hour and we can determine if someone is under a glamour or using Polyjuice..."

"Headmaster, the man was a metamorphmagus."

"You didn't tell that to the Aurors."

"It didn't matter in this case, but it will for future precautions..."

"Why didn't it matter?"

Harry wasn't happy about having to tip his hand. "We spoke after I captured him..."

Sirius jumped up. "You did what?"

"We chatted. I wanted to find out who'd sent him – and how he'd gotten inside the Scoil."

"Of all the crazy things..."

The meeting went downhill from there. None of them were pleased about Harry's foray into detective work.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry spent a very tense two weeks at Black Estate. He was allowed outside so long as he stayed in the wards. He was prohibited from the Quidditch game he and Victor had planned to attend in Dublin. He

had to withdraw from the Creature Club trip to Costa Rica where they apparently had a Peruvian Vipertooth Reserve.

It was a boring two weeks. Both Sirius and Remus treated him a bit like he was fragile and likely to break.

“Guys, Ireland has the defensive wards up. No more Death Eaters can sneak in, right?”

Remus grudgingly admitted that was true.

“So, the only things I have to fear are lightning strikes, getting hit by Muggle lorries, spoiled cans of tuna, and other random chance events...”

Sirius and Remus both agreed with Harry and still refused to let him leave. Victor, for his part, came over to the Black Estate a few times to keep Harry from overwhelming boredom. A lot of flying was done – and commiserating about overprotective guardians. Harry began teaching Victor a bit about warding.

Before Victor left from his final visit, both Sirius and Remus got pranked.

The idea had come from Victor. “They think you should be protected, right?”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“Well, let’s show them what that feels like...”

Harry smiled. They spent forty minutes executing the plan. After Victor left, Harry began cooking a highly aromatic dinner. The entire manor filled with the scent of roast beef.

Sirius was the first one to thunder down the stairs. Just as he walked into the kitchen – thud! – he found himself in an oversized baby jumper locked into an adult sized playpen. He began to yell. Either Harry was ignoring him or the silly pen was silenced.

Remus was entranced by the smell and joined in Sirius' fate ten minutes later.

Harry didn't even spare a glance at either of his guardians. He finished up with the roast and mashed potatoes and shallot-butter green beans. He sat down at the kitchen's table and ate a very fair helping. Then he turned, seemed shocked at the appearance of two 'babies,' and executed phase two of the prank: feeding time.

"All right, my little men, I have strained squash and apricots for both of you tonight..."

Both Sirius and Remus began howling at that. There was a delicious roast beef and Harry was planning to feed them strained squash! The injustice.

Harry proceeded to attempt the feeding. He had Sirius' face almost coated in cold squash before he gave up on the joke. Remus was howling with laughter.

"Even a prank can be a learning activity, you see..." That was all Harry said, but both Sirius and Remus understood the larger message. They also both appreciated 'real people food,' as Harry jokingly called it.

The roast beef was quickly demolished as were the sides Harry had prepared.

The last day of his imprisonment passed with some excitement. His O-level results showed up. It was rather a quick turnaround, Harry thought with a bit of surprise.

Harry got the envelope and opened it in full view of Sirius and Remus. They both wanted to see how he'd done.

International Standard O-Level Results

Scoil ar Draiocht Glas: Harry James Potter

Scoring Explanation: Tests graded at a 6 or 7 are considered a 'High Pass.' For magical subjects, students are encouraged to continue on through N-level coursework. Tests graded at a 4 or 5 are considered a 'Pass' and students are discouraged from continuing on to pursue N-level coursework. Tests graded at a 1, 2, or 3 are considered 'Not Passed.' Students may retake any subject test they wish after the payment of a fee during any standard testing session.

Magic Only Subjects:

Dueling and Defense 7

Charms 7

Transfiguration 7

Herbology 4

Magical History 5

Potions 6

Runes 7

Arithmancy 5

Study of Other Magical Races 6

Magical Languages 6

Warding 7

Subjects Reported for International Baccalaureate:

English Language 7

English Literature 6

European History 5

World History 5

Latin 7

French 6

German 5

Chemistry 5

Physics 4

Politics 6

Economics 6

Anthropology and Archaeology 7

Mathematics 5

“The kid’s as big a bookworm as you ever were, Remus.”

Remus just rolled his eyes. “Be glad he inherited his mother’s brain, Sirius. Don’t you remember that James just doodled on his History of Magic test at the OWL level to protest Binns?”

Sirius laughed. “Didn’t work, did it? The old bore is probably still there, granting naps to all his students. Goblin rebellions, my foot.”

“Why have I never heard that story before?” Harry was also smiling.

“Because I didn’t want you to purposely fail it just to follow in your father’s footsteps.”

“Okay,” Harry said, laughing. “But now it’s story time.”

So, the rest of the day was indeed story time. Sirius wooing girls; James chasing Lily; the antagonism between a certain group of Slytherins and Sirius and James in particular; embarrassing moments in the lives of many Hogwarts professors. James’ daring do on the

Quidditch team. Snape testing out Dark spells he'd invented on Sirius and James in sixth and seventh year... Harry stopped laughing around then.

"They allowed you to do those things to each other? They didn't expel him for using a slashing curse on Peter and Remus? That's horrible," was about the sum total of Harry's expressed thoughts on the subject. "Was no one paying attention?"

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

John Major had been spending an inordinate amount of time at MI6 since the 'bombing' in London. He had been hearing about the magical world from people other than that oaf Fudge and his subsequent replacements...and it was quite disturbing. The Voldemort fellow sounded like quite a piece of work.

And if he ever learned from some of the IRA's tactics, then everyone would be in trouble. Magical bombings everywhere, assassinations on the front page scaring everyone.

"What can we do?"

The chief 'squid,' as John Major called the man, had a dark gleam in his eye. "We put together some plans. We wait for the right moment. We destroy them. The magicals won't expect that the 'Muggles' are paying them any attention. They won't be expecting us to attack, Minister."

"Can we ensure we get them all?"

"We can be sure to get the worst of them... I've begun hearing rumors from my contacts in Knockturn Alley that Voldemort was resurrected."

"They can do that? Bring back the dead?"

"To some extent, yes. How they do it, I have no idea. But we'll get some assets in place to track where they are. Once we find a good location where we know they will be...we can arrange something."

“What are you thinking?” the prime minister asked.

“They’re terrorists, right? We’ll just ensure that one of their ‘terrorist plots’ backfires on them...”

“Be careful, man. This is my country we’re talking about.”

The man just nodded. “Careful as we can.”

The Prime Minister wasn’t terribly reassured. But he knew that the people who were supposed to deal with this sort of thing were dead or disbanded. He knew he wasn’t being told the whole truth, but couldn’t figure out what they were lying about.

He vowed to eventually figure it out.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry’s fourth year began with a lighter courseload (in terms of sheer number of tutorials taken) and an increase in the amount of work he did for each one. Where he’d done two to three hours of work per course pre-O-levels, now he was up to five hours per course. Juggling the schedule became harder.

He added a one-term course on Enchanting (which required O-levels in Charms and Runes) and would be taking his first official course on Warding in the following term. He continued on with his strongest magical subjects: Dueling, Charms, Transfiguration, Runes, and Potions. He had wanted to keep up on his Magical Languages, but found he didn’t have the time. He contented himself by remembering he didn’t care to learn Mermish, although Gobbleydegook could come in handy with the Gringotts goblins some dat. Instead, he wanted to do a special option in Spell Design: his Arithmancy was at an acceptable level to help and his Warding and Runes learning would make him quite gifted at the subject.

In his nonmagical studies, he chose a fairly full courseload. He didn’t have a mind for most sciences (save the wonders of Archaeology, which didn’t have an N-level option on offer). He took Advanced

English Language, Advanced English Literature, Latin Literature, French Literature, Political Studies, Advanced Economics, and Calculus. The English Language course was only a single term option. He'd take the Political Studies in place of it in second term and the economics course the term after. The Latin and French literature courses were each single term courses for the year. Calculus and English Literature were full year options. The only problem with all the single term options was having to revise for the N-levels after so much time in between tutorials.

He was busy, to be sure, but he and his group still practiced their dueling techniques two or three times a week. Harry and Victor found time for flying, as well. He really had become quite good as a seeker, but he was still terrible as a keeper.

Harry never went back down to that one corridor where he'd ambushed the assassin. He never answered any questions on what had happened either, not even for Victor.

"I'm sorry, Vic," he said one time. "It's not that I can't tell you. It's that I can't really bear to think about it again. I haven't tried obliterating myself or anything, I just hate pulling them up and reliving them, you understand? They're there and collecting dust. Best they stay that way, in my view."

Harry told no one, not even Sirius, the name of the man who'd come to kill him. Harry didn't want Sirius to act even stranger after knowing that Harry, Sirius, and the killer had spent several days together in training in Bulgaria.

Harry did, however, redouble his efforts on the meditative exercises. He was going to master them all by the time he left the School with his Master's. He would become an adult with a full set of powerful tools at his disposal. He was done with kidnappers and would-be assassins and controlling old men. And feeling helpless.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Bellatrix Lestrange fumed as she was demoted to preparing meals for her Master and his reconstituted Death Eaters. She had brought him back – and now she was the ‘camp cook.’

Blacks never stood for betrayal of any sort.

She had been tortured by her Master. She had been all but thrown to the curb. She wasn’t given tasks to perform, raids to lead or even join... She had nothing to do but mind the kitchen.

Bellatrix stirred the massive cauldron filled with vegetables and meats. It was the work of servants, house elves, bitter little squibs. It was not fitting for a Black.

She would find a way...a way to get even.

She began dishing the food into bowls. She was even expected to serve the ‘menfolk.’

She bit her tongue...and bided her time.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

After the meal Bellatrix served, Voldemort sealed the room and met with his Inner Circle.

“We have two agenda items: freeing our brethren from Azkaban and taking Hogwarts. The Ministry is destroyed, the only power remaining is in Scotland now. We will create a new government there and root out the mudblood cancer.”

The planning for Azkaban took hours, as it needed to be conducted with a limited force while at the same time freeing all of the Dementors on the island. It wasn’t easy to accomplish two large objectives in a single stroke.

The last question was when.

Voldemort had the final response to that, as well. “Two weeks from tomorrow...”

Seeing blank faces.

“Halloween.”

The conversation turned to Hogwarts and lasted well into the early morning.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Many people awoke on November first to grim news.

Sirius broke the story to Harry before the young man went down to breakfast. Harry’s reaction? “The escaped prisoners can’t get into Ireland, right? Then it’s just a lesson the British have to learn. Don’t be stupid handling prisoners.”

Sirius had begun to note Harry’s coldness regarding anything British after his kidnapping. Since the assassin attack it had grown worse.

John Major, the British Prime Minister, took the news from his chief ‘squid’ much less calmly.

“There were remnants of the Ministry still around and they didn’t even try to defend the prison? Why didn’t they ship the prisoners elsewhere – or get some other government to help?”

“Most of the world’s other magical governments have turned their backs on Britain...”

“What?”

“Yes, the British Ministry has burned quite a few relationships in the last twenty years. They don’t have a lot of goodwill. Especially since they let twenty or so of the terrorists caught in the early ‘80s walk free...”

“They did what?”

“There were allegations of bribes and such, from what I hear, but no one ever dug deep enough to prove it. Plus a lot of their mess spilled out into other countries – mysterious killings in Germany, odd bombings in France, disappearances of prominent wizards and muggles in Italy and Spain. All of it looked like the nonsense from these terrorists.”

“Who in their right mind lets terrorists walk free – how did the people support and believe it, even excluding the official corruption?”

“Witches and wizards are, for the most part, hidebound in tradition and deeply respectful of those who are more powerful than they are – they are also scurrilous gossips. The Ministry is made up of a lot of powerful people so they get believed. The newspapers there were bought and paid for in the same way that the politicians were...”

“So the freed terrorists waited more than a decade before breaking out the imprisoned terrorists?”

The ‘squid’ just nodded.

“You have a green light on Operation Misfire,” the Prime Minister said. “Wait until you have the best possible target.”

“I have a very good idea where they will be going. The only question is when.”

The Prime Minister just nodded. The details made him nauseous.

Inside what was left of the British Auror command, the reaction was subdued. The Director of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones, had perished in the attack. Three people were currently locked in a political battle to head the department. Rufus Scrimgeour had headed the Aurors for three years, since Amelia had taken the overall Directorship. Rufus wasn’t well liked.

Winston Dawlish was a senior Auror and was relatively competent, but was despised within the department as a political suck-up. He’d been a favorite of the late Cornelius Fudge.

The third candidate was the recently reactivated Alastor Moody. He wasn't liked or disliked by the ranks...he was feared.

Each of the three candidates was pushing for a different response to the breakout.

Scrimgeour: "We need to make a good showing for the people. They need confidence in us all, particularly the Ministry as it gets reconstituted. We need a united front to show we're handling things well. We'll bring Harry Potter back to Britain to improve morale." His detractors complained that Scrimgeour never did anything, just talked of doing things.

Dawlish: "We need international ties now. We need to bring in forces from the other countries to help us stop all of this. We're too small and disorganized to handle this sort of disaster by ourselves. I have good ties with colleagues in France and Spain. I should be the one to organize this." Many people agreed, but others say it as a stalling tactic. It seemed to put the onus on others to recapture the prisoners.

Moody: "If we don't help ourselves right now, no one will be interested in giving us the time of day. We were sloppy with the prison. We got cocky and distracted and the opposition overwhelmed us. Let's do it right this time. We catch them; we try them; we execute the guilty ones. I lost my nose and eye capturing the Lestranges and my leg to Evan Rosier. I will be damned if I have to keep going through this for the rest of my rapidly shrinking lifespan." Most of the veteran Aurors agreed with Moody, even if personal differences with the man kept them from supporting him.

The debate raged within the temporary Auror headquarters...and nothing got done.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Come in, Mr. Potter. Please take a seat."

"Hello, Headmaster."

The ritual was an old one by now. Harry thought it comforting, a tradition that never seemed to change about the Scoil.

“With all the chaos over the last break, I never did get the chance to congratulate you on some excellent O-level scores. It’s been a while since anyone rated straight 7s in the wanded subjects...”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I was also pleased with your International Baccalaureate scores, as well. Are you still considering attending a nonmagical university?”

“It’s very possible, but I can’t make a lot of plans until Britain settles down...”

Orion Murphy-Black just nodded.

“One thing, Mr. Potter, I wanted to mention. This will be our last meeting as student and Headmaster. I’m stepping down before the next term starts...”

“Because of what happened at the end of last term?”

The Headmaster nodded.

“I’ll announce it to everyone at breakfast tomorrow morning. I think it’s best. Anyway I was due to step down in a few more terms as it was. We don’t like the blood to get cold at the Scoil, do we?”

“Well, sir, I’m grateful to this day that you sent me a letter of admission.”

“The Scoil has become a richer place by far, young master wizard.”

The rest of the meeting was pleasant and relaxed. The Headmaster dutifully confirmed Harry’s planned coursework. Orion Murphy-Black mentioned that he would be rejoining Gringotts in their Inheritance office.

“I never knew you were a lawyer, sir.”

The Headmaster smiled. "We each have to keep some secrets, don't we?"

They parted with a handshake...and an invitation to Harry's mastery party, whenever that should take place.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The attack on Hogwarts occurred three days after the school children had gone home for the holidays. There were a number of reasons for the timing:

- attacking children didn't support Voldemort's goals, as they would be the ones to create the future generations of witches and wizards for his eternal empire;

- the wards at Hogwarts were weaker without all the additional energy supplied by students casting spells all day and night long;

- and Voldemort didn't want to give the international community a reason to actively oppose him.

He could care less if they sponsored meaningless resolutions in their versions of the Wizengamot...so long as none sent troops.

Voldemort and his troops, plus the two hundred dementors he'd liberated from Azkaban, made their way through the Forbidden Forest. His scouts told him that Hogsmeade had been abandoned upon word of Voldemort's advance on Hogwarts. Even the centaurs were gone.

"It's time. Nott, Mulciber, herd the dementors into place. We'll set them to draining the ambient magic. The rest of us, save Bellatrix, will then begin with the ward breaking techniques I taught you."

Everyone got into place. Bellatrix, still serving out penance for planning out the destruction of the British Ministry of Magic, was assigned to keep the dementors in place once they began to draw down the wards. Not only did the job require her to be near the horrific creatures, but it was also a job that she wasn't suited for.

Bellatrix was many things, but she wasn't a storehouse of happy memories. She couldn't cast the Patronus Charm. Voldemort knew it.

He knew it. Voldemort apparently hoped that Bellatrix would slip up and receive the Kiss.

But Bellatrix didn't slip up once during the whole seven hours it took to bring down the wards. Apparently the castle had been abandoned by the staff...as no one interrupted the ward breaking process. There weren't any well organized Aurors to interrupt them in any case.

Voldemort's forces, save Bellatrix and the Dementors, stormed the abandoned castle.

"The library has been cleaned out, and all the famed artifacts of the school had been carted away. They knew – somehow – that this invasion was coming. No matter. We will find the traitor.

"For now, the castle is ours. Hogsmeade is ours, for our most faithful supporters. I will re-open the Chamber of Secrets and command the basilisk to guard our new seat of power. Britain will fall at our feet. We will remake this world in our image. Blood and power are all that matter now."

He would rest for a day before he began constructing new wards to keep him and his followers secure. In this, the New Ministry of Magic. Children could be taught here still and his hand-selected bureaucrats could keep a watchful eye over them. Adults who might be given to insurrection would be more careful and cautious if their children were forced to attend school here, say from age five on to age twenty.

He would issue the proclamations at the New Year.

"Ministry Reformed at Hogwarts." It was the perfect, and obvious, location.

"All Children Five through Twenty Mandated to Receive Government-Funded Education." Fifteen years of indoctrination: no one would be able to withstand that.

“All Witches and Wizards to Present Themselves for Blood Status Review.” Would anyone dare to speak out against this? Voldemort would soon find out.

“Three Year Compulsory Government Service for All Wizards Aged Twenty to Fifty.” What better army than one filled with Imperiused conscripts?

“Hogwarts School to Update Curriculum; Muggle Studies Now Mandatory.” Witch burnings and the truth about muggles invading the wizarding world would be the new order of the day. He would leave out of the announcement the new courses in the Dark Arts and Battle Tactics. Proper soldiers needed proper tools, didn’t they?

It would be wonderful. Plans came together like this so rarely.

Then he might begin to look more carefully at the Harry Potter who had torn his life from him. He had only caught brief glimpses of the boy when he had occupied the body of that bumbling teacher at Hogwarts, but he seemed like a slip of nothing... His death would be proof that Voldemort was back – and invulnerable now.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Bellatrix Lestrange screamed. She screamed in frustration, in rage, in utter hatred.

She’d been assigned quarters inside Hogwarts...in the former Hufflepuff area, next to the kitchens. She was now assigned to manage the house elves.

She bent down and plucked up a wooden box she had carried with her ever since her ‘Master’s’ resurrection. His trinkets were inside. She’d never told him that she’d found all of them, after all he’d never thanked her for bringing him back to life.

They were valuable to him somehow, but she hadn’t discovered the exact reasons why that was.

She knew they were critical to the justice she'd be exacting. It no longer mattered if Voldemort killed her for what she'd done. She would fulfill the Black Code. She would have justice for the wrongs done her.

She didn't know how...or when...or where, but Voldemort would pay for the humiliations he'd heaped upon Bellatrix Lestrange.

And he would never suspect. Not until the exact moment it happened.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter had a wonderful Christmas holiday at the Black Estate. Victor had come over for a day and they had exchanged gifts. Harry received an enchanted pickaxe and magical rope for his first expedition inside a magical tomb. Victor received a dueling cloak in advance of his first performance in a dueling tournament come late April.

On Christmas Day, Harry kicked the house elves out of the kitchens and fixed a massive dinner the muggle way. Roast goose, garlic-dill rolls, savory roasted sweet potatoes, delicious vegetable salads, plum puddings, mince pies, and a half dozen other dishes filled the table at noon. Harry got to cook so infrequently now, but he liked to do it up right from time to time. The skill, along with his interest in gardening, was about the only blessing the Dursleys had ever provided him.

Andromeda, Ted, and Nymphadora Tonks – recently readmitted to the Black Family – plus Orion Muphy-Black, plus Remus Lupin, plus several other master's candidates from the Scoil joined Harry and Sirius for the sumptuous feast.

The conversation inevitably turned to the happenings of the last week.

“The Germans offered to send Hit-Wizards to help retake Hogwarts, but the British turned them down. The refusal supposedly came from the British Muggle Prime Minister's office of all places...” said one of the master's candidates, who was working in the field of international magical cooperation (what an oxymoron, Harry thought).

Andromeda broke into the monologue at that point. “I attended Hogwarts and feel sad at what’s happened to it, but I can no longer in good conscience remain in Britain. My Nymphadora was twenty minutes late arriving to work the morning the Ministry was destroyed. It was the only thing that saved her life.”

The metamorphmagus blushed and her hair shifted to a bright red. “I was only just out of the Auror training when it happened. The old line Aurors basically started brawling with each other...and nothing else happened. It was time to leave.”

Sirius said, “We’re glad you could be here today, Nympha—“

The blushing ex-Auror shot him a look that stopped Sirius mid-word.

Harry laughed and brought the fork full of sage dressing to his mouth when he felt a wash of a massive amount of energy hit him.

He looked around the table. A few others were reacting as well. Sirius was the first one to ask. “What just happened?”

“It was like the largest wave of magic I’ve ever felt, like a powerful ward collapsed or something... Could it have been the ones surrounding the Scoil, Orion?”

The Headmaster shook his head. “No, I’m anchored into them and I can still feel them.”

The conversation and speculation continued for some time before Remus finally said, “Hogwarts...”

At that, many at the table began to nod. Orion speculated, “If something had happened to the vaunted Hogwarts wards – but weren’t they brought down last week by Voldemort? – then the magical shockwave could be enormous.”

Ted Tonks looked confused. “But new wards wouldn’t have absorbed enough power to make a blast that stretched for hundreds of miles.”

There was something else involved.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Theodotus Brankovitch sat in his office in MI6. He was balding, in his mid sixties, and was the eldest of the squibs still working for Her Majesty's Government. He was also quite pleased with himself.

His longest held plan had just come to pass. It was Christmas Day and he'd given himself the one true gift he'd always wanted: justice.

Theodotus wasn't his given name; nor was he born a Brankovitch. But the name Thomas Nott had ceased to exist decades earlier when a ten year old boy never received an invitation to attend Hogwarts. He'd been tossed out of his family for the 'crime' of being a squib. They'd apparently hoped that the disgraceful squib had died.

Theodotus Brankovitch had the last laugh, of course.

Operation Misfire had been executed this morning. Eight massive, but crude, bombs had been dropped on and near the area where Hogwarts was located. Satellite photography had proven that Hogsmeade and Hogwarts had been utterly destroyed. A team of SAS was just now prowling the grounds to bring back first hand reporting.

Theodotus had hypothesized that the explosives would have a wonderfully devastating effect when exploded against the famous Hogwarts wards. Plus they'd had several hundred Dementors, it seemed, from what his Knockturn Alley sources had told him. An infernal creature like a Dementor could be destroyed, but they inevitably claimed the life of the wizard responsible with the magical backlash.

The report he'd seen from the Unspeakables suggested that using Fiendfyre or some other dark fire spell on a Dementor could cause the beast to explode, along with half an acre of the land surrounding it. As a beast of almost pure energy and emotion, it had quite a colossal effect when it died.

Killing hundreds of them with bombs had only intensified the devastating magical effect.

Hogwarts was destroyed; Voldemort and his blood purist thugs were destroyed; Theodotus' last remaining known family, younger brother Bradford Nott, was surely dead. Theodotus suspected the man had a son, but it didn't matter to him.

Operation Misfire had been perfect.

It was now being spun to the other citizens of Britain as a terrorist operation gone awry. Dozens of suspected terrorists, similar to the ones who'd tried to bomb and bring down the World Trade Center in Manhattan, had accidentally detonated a large bomb, triggering a chain reaction with all the other components they'd procured. That it had happened in a remote part of Scotland with no loss of civilian life was a godsend.

John Major would get support to step up anti-terrorist operations. The people of the nation would be freaked out and reassured in the same moment. MI6 would get more interesting work to perform.

Life was good.

Justice was done.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry returned to the Scoil after his Christmas break. He had heard of the destruction of Hogwarts and the likely deaths of Voldemort and his followers, but he didn't dwell on it.

There were a number of things Harry didn't dwell upon.

He didn't think about a Prophecy he'd never heard of or witnessed that had been destroyed in the British Ministry of Magic.

He didn't think about the dark artifacts known as horcruxes nor dwell on the fact that Bellatrix Lestrange had managed to bring together all of Voldemort's horcruxes in one location at Hogwarts.

He didn't think about how muggle bombs created heat far in excess of what was required to destroy horcruxes, let alone incinerate people, stone, and everything else they touched.

He never thought about why his deceased parents had been targeted by a madman...or why he had been targeted by Dumbledore for cruelty in his earlier years.

Lastly, he never wondered why Divination was never offered at the Scoil ar Draiocht Glas. Divination was, of course, such a wooly discipline that it wasn't taught at all. Didn't everyone know that prophecies, in particular, were quite easy to fake and that even 'real' ones came to pass less than a fifth of the time?

Really...who would ever set any stock by such a ridiculous thing.

Harry never wondered about such important details of a life he might have had to live. He just studied, ate meals with Sirius and Remus, dueled with Victor and the others in his little group, and enjoyed life.

He never wondered what would have happened if he hadn't made the Irish Choice, as he'd come to think of it. Coming to the School for Green Magic was, perhaps, the best choice he'd ever made. There was no need for second guessing.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Epilogue:

Harry Potter clutched his Certificate of Mastery in his left hand as he took his last stroll as a student through the caverns protecting the Scoil ar Draiocht Glas. He would be eighteen in a few months. He would be starting at the Wharton School in Pennsylvania little over a month after that. He'd decided to learn Muggle-style financial management and to take in a foreign country at the same time. After all, he could inject the Potter Estate with some good old fashioned American-style capitalism...the goblins were far too cautious in their financial outlook. Harry would learn to take care of his money and Sirius' as well.

But, that was months away.

For the rest of the spring and summer, Harry, Sirius, and a crew of cursebreaking enthusiasts – sadly not including Harry's friend Victor, who had a full term left at the Scoil before he finished his Mastery – would be investigating ancient Mayan ruins in Guatemala under the first expedition funded by Black Potter Excavations.

Sirius has been busy for the last year setting up the Black Potter company which they both intended to put to serious use throughout the world. There were many secrets of magic that still hadn't been rediscovered.

Harry was less interested in treasure than in knowledge. He'd come to acknowledge much of Aleksandr Dobrydin's final words of wisdom to him, with a twist. 'Most knowledge isn't written down, but passed from person to person.' However, people always left clues that were useful to some extent to reconstructing knowledge. Harry no longer needed the exact instructions for a spell. He just needed an idea of what it was meant to do and what basis it worked up (earth magic, soul evocation, arithmantic formulation, runic encoding, or otherwise). Harry could reconstruct a bit of magic from that point.

After all, he'd completed a dual Mastery in Dueling and Warding, with a special topic in Spell Design and Modification in less than two years. Harry knew his magic. He had an almost instinctual ability to grasp it, master it, and modify it to his needs.

Harry arrived back into the forest that hid the Scoil caverns. He saw the tiny leprechauns out in force today. They were snickering and singing and laughing. It was a wonderful day.

Harry apparated to the Black Estate. He cast a framing spell on his Certificate and hung it next to the one Sirius had earned a year and a half earlier. Sirius had delayed getting his as long as he could, but eventually even he couldn't justify continued study at the Scoil. Sirius had had to finally become an 'adult.' He couldn't hang out with his godson inside the Scoil any longer.

The party was held in the back yard. Scoil graduations were always private affairs, just the teachers and the students, with the public portions held outside the Scoil wards. Harry walked outside to see his godfather, Remus, and three dozen other people Harry knew and liked. They'd come to celebrate his adulthood, his independence.

Harry accepted a small glass of Firewhiskey and then began to circulate. Dinner would be in an hour. Then a few gifts to give and receive – which was, apparently, a Scoil tradition. The graduate gave small tokens to each person who attended their graduation party. Harry had settled on a practical gift, enchanted ward monitors. Each one he'd crafted had a different look: some were golden baubles, some crystal, some were iron or pewter representations of famous archaeological sites. Each of them performed the same tasks: they reported on which wards were raised on a given property, their relative strength levels, and whether or not unpermitted individuals were attempting to cross them or break through them.

After years of danger, Harry had developed a sufficiently deep paranoid streak.

Harry mingled. There were a number of pretty witches in attendance, some of whom Harry had dated before, but he felt no desire to settle down anytime soon. He was about to commit himself to four years mostly spent in America.

But flirting was fun. Especially with Nymphadora Tonks. She could dish out the suggestive compliments, but was utterly unable to take them in return. It was fun seeing her turn colors...she was utterly transparent. Everyone knew Tonks was a metamorphmagus. Next to no one knew that about Harry.

As for his animagus forms, Harry had only informed Sirius of one of them – and Sirius was the only person to know that much. The conversation had been long and drawn out. Mostly it had consisted of Sirius begging in both human and animal form.

When Harry caved, he only said the following, "One of my forms will be very useful for cursebreaking if we're ever in a tight spot, say a

collapsed tunnel. I can become a type of viper. Logical for a parselmouth, of course.”

He told no one of his large mammalian form or his flying form. Those were secrets to hold for now.

One of Sirius’ financial advisors – and friend of both Harry and Sirius – began chatting with Harry. He stopped daydreaming and eyeing some of the more suggestively dressed witches and tried to pay attention.

“Now that the situation in Britain is repairing itself, do you plan to return?”

Harry cocked his head and considered the question. “Never thought of it. The goblins have sold off the land at Godric’s Hollow that my parents owned outside town. The lands where Potter Manor used to be before it was burned down have been kept. Sirius arranged for the Ministry of Magic to purchase the cottage where my parents and I were attacked by Voldemort. It’s some kind of official memorial now, I think. Other than that, I don’t believe I have property there.”

“But you don’t have to have an ancestral manor to go back sometime.”

“Well, let’s consider what memories I have of the place. I can recall the night my parents were killed there. I have all too clear images of my life with the Dursleys. And then, my last time back, was when I was kidnapped. It’s safe to say I have an entire world of countries to explore before curiosity will drag me back...”

“They could use you, Harry. They’ve got the new Ministry building set up on the land they bought from you, if you didn’t know, plus the new School they’re building right next door. Soon enough Godric’s Hollow will be a mostly wizarding village again.”

Harry just nodded. He’d never been, but he’d shared Sirius’ memories of what the place had looked like before the attack and what the gravesites looked like. He loved the memories of his parents, but the very idea of Britain was repugnant to him.

Finally it was time for food. People slowly moved to the massive table. This meal the house elves had spent days working on. Harry got the seat of honor at the table underneath the tent. The weather had been beautiful all day long.

Harry surveyed the faces. Remus, Orion, Andromeda, Ted, Nymphadora, Victor, Maya Beltain, Fred and George Weasley (recently enrolled master's candidates at the Scoil and prospective business partners of Sirius'), Padraig Connelly, and many others. He stood up and extended his glass.

"Friends, a toast to new beginnings. May each of us find the place we enjoy most and the time to make our dreams real." He downed his champagne. "Now, let us all enjoy the feast."

The smiles of everyone assembled made the food taste even better.